

Side-by-Side Dreamers

Iori Miyazawa



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Characters

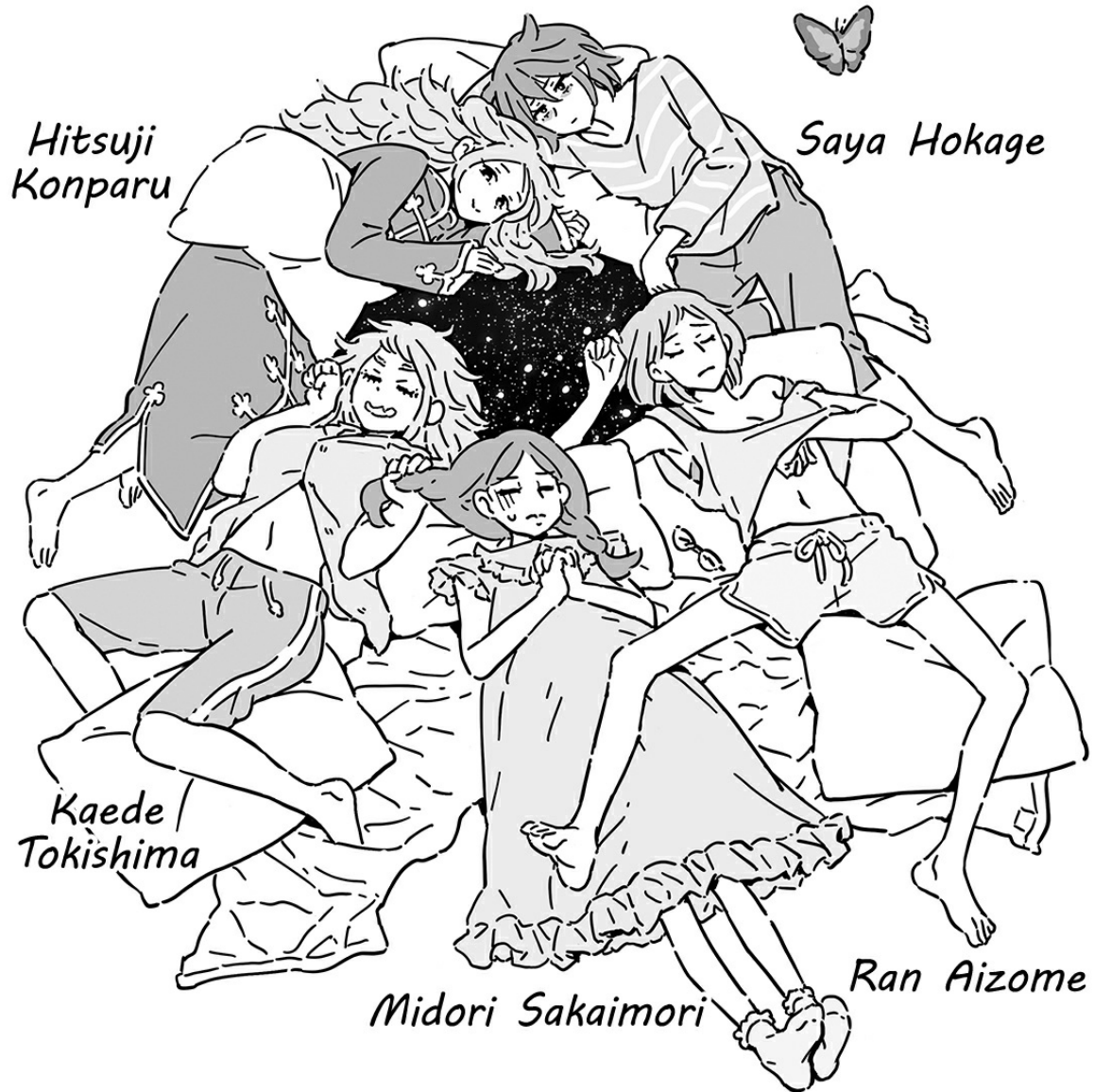


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1

In a classroom warmed by the beautiful afternoon sun, the sound of a female teacher—one who was bordering on retirement age—droning on about modern literature dominated the room like some kind of incantation.

It was after lunch, and the full-bellied high school girls were not getting sufficient blood flow to their brains. From the rear seat, it was impossible not to notice heads swaying with drowsiness.

The sight alone was enough to make one sleepy, but Saya Hokage would not fall asleep.

She sat at the very back of the classroom, and in a window seat at that. It was a position that, under normal circumstances, should have promised her a safe place to nap in class.

However, that only worked for people who *could* sleep.

Saya had her elbows on the desk and her cheeks resting on her palms as she stared blankly towards the blackboard. Though she wasn't going as far as sleeping in class, her thoughts were extremely muddled. Her eyes were open, but her gaze was vacant, and the teacher's voice only served as incidental background noise.

"...Hokage. Hokage!"

Saya blinked, finally realizing she was being called. It appeared, on closer inspection, that the teacher was glaring at her.

"Are we awake now?"

"...Wasn't asleep," Saya answered in a husky voice.

"Then read the next passage, starting from the top."

It was all well and good to ask for the next passage, but Saya had no idea where they had read up to. After idly playing with the pages of her textbook a bit, Saya was forced to admit: "...I don't know. Where're we at?"

The teacher let out an exasperated sigh. “No, nevermind.”

Another student was chosen, and they began reading from the textbook.

“It seems many people are unable to sleep at night unless they turn out the lights, but I find the darkness suffocating, and can never sleep’...”

Saya hung her head, lowering her gaze to the top of her desk.

Lately, this same sort of thing had happened a number of times. She still wasn’t used to humiliating herself in front of the entire room, and it irritated her that she was left behind as class moved on without her. Still, there was nothing that could be done about it.

Saya Hokage couldn’t sleep.

Night or day, at home or at school.

No time, no place, no how.

If that meant she wasn’t sleepy, not sleeping would be fine. If her head were clear, she could have put all the time that other people used for sleeping to good use. But in Saya’s case, she did feel sleepy, and there was no solution in sight.

She was sleepy, but unable to sleep. It was the worst.

She had tried everything she could think of: eating before sleep, taking a hot bath before sleep, stretching before sleep, working out until she was exhausted before sleep. She changed her futon. Changed her pillow. Changed where she slept. Tried changing the time, from morning, to noon, to night. She gave those hypnosis tracks people used for getting to sleep a shot. She went for counseling at a sleep clinic. She even tried sleeping meds.

None of it had any effect.

Despite her fervent wish to just fall asleep, to let go of consciousness for even a moment, Saya had been awake and in a daze for several days.

Thanks to that, her grades plummeted, making her feel like a pariah both at school and at home. There was nothing she could do about the awful bags under her eyes, and the wrinkles on her brow frightened people when she looked at them. She was always cranky, and she couldn’t respond properly

when people did try to talk to her, so her classmates now kept their distance. From their perspective, she must have looked like one of those stupid “yankee” delinquents.

Eventually, the bell signaled the end of class. The teacher left, and the excited chatter of students filled the classroom.

No one talked to Saya.

Next was sixth period, mathematics, and when that was over she could go home, but...

Is there any point in me being here?

During first year, she hadn't been bad at math, but in her current state, a logical train of thought was too difficult for her. The truth was, ever since she'd fallen into this current state of insomnia, math class had been reduced to a period where all she did was sit there, staring at mathematical equations that meant nothing to her. Although, you could say the same of her other classes, too.

Pulling back her chair, Saya stood up. Nobody noticed as she stumbled out of the class, and no one would be bothered by her skipping the next class.

Saya had been forced to realize early on that no one would take her trouble with sleeplessness all that seriously.

The empty condolences of people who told her there was no need to rush things and it would get better with time were one thing, but she also got lectured about how she needed to live on a more regular schedule. However, Saya was now past the stage where she was angry at the lack of understanding from those around her.

She wanted to sleep... That was all. Sleep.

If sleep wasn't possible, then to lie down, at least.

Saya stumbled through the noisy recess-time hallway, her unsteady steps carrying her down the stairs.

The first floor was dimly lit and there were few people around. When she opened the door to the health room and went in, the school doctor, who was

sitting at her desk, looked up.

“Hokage-san.”

“Is it okay if I rest here?”

“You can’t sleep again?”

“Not a wink...”

The school doctor stood up, gesturing Saya towards a bed with curtains around it.

“Go ahead and use one of the beds. I hope that’ll help you feel at least a little better.”

Saya mumbled a “thank you,” then sat down on one of the two beds. She removed her hallway slippers and slipped under the covers.

“You’re welcome to come anytime, okay?” the school doctor said as she put out the fluorescent light next to the bed before returning to her seat.

The school doctor was one of the precious few people in this school who showed a proper amount of concern for Saya’s insomnia. It was good to be told she could come anytime, but Saya held back and did her best not to become a regular. Besides, even if she came to the health room, she wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway.

She closed her eyes and breathed in gently, feeling the warmth of the bed.

Breathe in...

Breathe out...

Breathe in...

Breathe out...

...

She couldn’t sleep.

She turned over. The ticking of the wall clock caught her attention. *Tick, tick, tick, tick*, she counted the ticks from the steady rhythm of the second hand.

One, two, three, four...

...

Five hundred sixty-five, five hundred sixty-six, five hundred sixty-seven...

On the other side of the curtain, the school doctor stopped writing. The back of her chair creaked; it seemed as though she was stretching. She exhaled a voiceless sigh.

The castors of the chair moved, and the school doctor stood up.

There was a clacking of heels that grew distant, the sound of the health room door sliding open, and then closing again. The footsteps departed down the hall.

With no one left but herself, the room grew very quiet. And yet, Saya couldn't sleep.

She lay on her back, eyes closed. As she stared up at the ceiling in the dim light, it became harder and harder for her to endure this.

This vague suffering... how long would it last? Was it going to be like this the rest of her life? When she spoke of her troubles with sleeping, there was one thing people occasionally said to mollify her: "No one ever died of an inability of sleep."

It made her mad every time she heard it, but Saya had at least looked into it herself; to see if it was true that no one had ever died from lack of sleep.

The fact of the matter was, people had.

She found there was a syndrome called Fatal Familial Insomnia, which caused total sleeplessness, leading to death after about two years. However, it was a pretty rare syndrome, and it was genetic, too. When she asked her parents about it, no one on either side of the family had ever suffered from such a disease.

Conversely, she found a number of accounts of people who went years without sleep, but that information had come from dodgy aggregator websites, or translations of foreign news reports, so she had no idea how much it could be trusted.

Meanwhile, there was also talk of sleep deprivation having been used as a

form of torture in many countries. The method of sleep deprivation developed by Nazi Germany, a technique of 180-hour sleep deprivation which the CIA used to great effect in the Middle East, Chinese authorities interrupting the sleep of Uighur detainees every 25 minutes... The literature on these occurrences always noted that victims suffered from abnormalities in their mental and physical health.

While feeling sympathetic to the victims, Saya couldn't help but think that it was as though she was being tortured 24 hours a day.

Will I go mad?

Or, have I already...?

The more she thought about it, the more unfair it seemed that her life was controlled by something as minor as being unable to sleep. She simply couldn't accept it.

As the thought seethed away at the bottom of her hazy mind, there were footsteps again, approaching from the hallway.

She thought the school doctor had returned, but the sound was different. These weren't heels, but flat-bottomed hallway slippers. It wasn't a teacher—it was a student like Saya.

They approached with flat steps and opened the door to the health room without so much as a knock. They must have noticed the school doctor was away, as they stopped for a moment, but entered the room instead of turning back.

"Fwahhhh," came the relaxed yawn of a girl. "...Mmff. So sleepy."

No sooner had Saya realized the mumbling voice was coming closer than the curtain was suddenly drawn back.

"Um," Saya breathed. She ought to have been surprised, but she wasn't in any state to give more than a vague response. When she had just barely managed to force herself to sit, the owner of that voice fell towards her.

"...Uwah?"

This person, who seemed almost airy in nature, was sleeping on top of the

blanket. Her curly, light hair spilled out across the back of her blazer. She was smaller than Saya, and despite the fact that she was lying on top of both of Saya's legs, she hardly felt the girl's weight at all.

"What's with this girl?" Saya's thoughts slipped out of her mouth. Being sleep-addled had made her careless, and whatever came to mind had a way of just leaking right out.

"Um, hey," Saya greeted cautiously.

"Mmhm? Mmmmm." Listlessly, the girl's head moved, a profile of her face peeking out from under her hair. Her eyes were closed, and her lips appeared to smile.

"Hey. You. What's your deal?"

When Saya addressed her in more forceful tone, the lips moved slightly.

"...ight."

"Huh? What?"

When she leaned in closer to pick up what the girl was saying, the mumbled voice crept into Saya's ear.

"Good night."

Her vision shook; it felt like a maelstrom formed inside her head.

Out of nowhere, there was now a current in the pool of drowsiness that had gradually filled up inside of her skull, as if a dam had suddenly broken, or someone had pulled the plug on a bathtub.

"Huh, huh, huh?"

She had hardly any time to be confused. Her consciousness was cast into the muddy flow of drowsiness, and she was dragged down into that pitch-black maelstrom.

"What's going on? No, I'm scared—"

Terror rose at the sudden sensation, but there was no way to resist it.

In no time, her consciousness was subsumed by the darkness.

Oh, this.

She had forgotten it, but knew what this was.

This sensation she hadn't felt in too long...

Sleep.

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While walking a road I hadn't been down since leaving home, there were yellow colored pylons everywhere, getting in the way. When I got pissed at having nearly tripped so many times, I asked a person who was passing by what was up, and they clicked their tongue and glared at me.

"There's something wrong with you. You're always saying stuff like that. That's why you had to leave this town like you did. I don't know what you're thinking, coming back here."

They spoke a mile a minute as they chewed me out, then clicked their tongue in distaste again as they walked off.

I felt intensely embarrassed, and started to cry.

They were right. I really shouldn't have come back.

"You can't help it," my lover walking at my side said, stretching to wipe the tears from my face.

"It's because of the Suiju. Everyone's graves are here."

When she told me that, I looked closer, and the pylons had everyone's names written on them.

"It'll be here soon. Are you ready?"

I knew how to slay Suiju, so I nodded. With a satisfied smile, my lover tried to kiss me, but behind her, I could see a creature with multiple legs growing out of

the side of it approaching. It was a Suiju! I pointed at it, and opened my mouth to warn her.

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“Ah...!”

Suddenly regaining consciousness, Saya opened her eyes. For a little while, she wasn’t sure what had happened. While staring up vacantly at the dimly lit ceiling of the health room, it gradually dawned on her.

“I... slept?”

She had been asleep. Dreaming, even.

How many days had it been since that happened? The sleep she had given up on ever seeing again had come back to her once more.

“I slept. I was able to sleep.”

Looking beside her, there she was. Her lover. It wasn’t clear when, but at some point she had laid down next to Saya to sleep. Having confirmed her safety, Saya let out a sigh of relief.

“Oh, good... She made it.”

If she’d been attacked by the Suiju, she wouldn’t have gotten off lightly. Looking at her peaceful face as she snoozed, affection and relief welled up inside her.

Saya leaned in, planting a gentle kiss on her lover’s parted lips. The soft sensation, and the sweet smell were intoxicating.

Oh, right. This was how it felt.

...

“...Huh?”

This was how it felt?

How what felt?

Saya blinked, looking again at her lover, whom she had just kissed. She was a soft, nice-smelling girl with airy, curly hair.

“...Huh?”

Huhhhh?!

Saya jumped up out of the bed.

Wh-Who's this?!

My lover? Why? I was completely convinced of that in the dream, and it didn't seem weird until just now, but now that I can think about it clearly, I have no clue who this girl is...

While she was still frozen with panic, her “lover” opened her eyes.

“Ngh...”

Listlessly rising from a face-down position, she turned her vacant gaze towards Saya. In the dimly lit room, there seemed to be a dull gleam in those eyes. It was like she was a beast in human form, and Saya started backing away across the bed without realizing it.

Moving backwards, her hand grasped nothing but air and Saya fell out of the bed.

“Wahh! Ow!”

Her “lover” peered over the edge of the bed, looking down at Saya, who had hit her back and had the wind knocked out of her.

“You okay?”

Saya couldn't respond. She just looked up at her, wide-eyed; the earlier feeling of satisfaction scared her. The thought that she had mistaken an utter stranger for her lover, of all things, was unbearably frightening.

“Hey,” her “lover” started to say, but stopped short as she seemed to realize something. Lowering her face, she lifted up her right hand, touched her lips, tilted her head to the side—then looked at Saya again.

“Just now, did you—”

“S-Sorr—!” Saya shouted, cutting her off, before getting up in a hurry, her feet sliding on the floor.

“Hey, wait!”

Ignoring the calls to stop, she pulled aside the curtain and moved away from the bed. With labored steps, she crossed the room, quickly opening the door and heading out.

It was already after school. Saya ran down a hallway just barely colored by the last light of the evening sun, snatched her shoes from her locker, then fled the school.

2

The inside of Saya's head was a mess.

Still not entirely sure what to think, she ran for most of what was usually a twenty-minute walk home. The moment she opened the door and stepped inside, she ran into Aya—her sister, three years her senior—as she was coming out of the living room.

“Whoa.” Having apparently just gotten out of the bath, Aya, who had a towel wrapped around her head and an ice pop sticking out of her mouth, reacted to Saya's momentum with shock. “Is something up...?”

Saya, still out of breath, just shook her head.

Looking dubiously at her little sister, Aya raised an eyebrow as she seemed to notice something.

“You're not drowsy?”

“Huh... Why?”

“Your eyes are open in a way I haven't seen from you lately. You look like a startled cat. Did something happen?”

“I guess... you could say something did,” Saya said, then went quiet. She lacked the words to describe her earlier experience.

“What's up?”

“I dunno... I had a nightmare... or something like that.”

“What, you managed to sleep?”

“Huh? Well... Just a little...?”

“Hey, good for you. Your complexion's kind of looking better. Although, you could also say your usual complexion's not exactly the best.”

“Oh, shove off.”

“Huh, where's your bag?”

When Aya pointed it out, Saya realized she was empty handed. She'd left it in her classroom.

"I forgot it..."

"What are you even doing? You gonna go back? Should I bring the car out?"

"Nah. Gonna rest a bit."

She took off her shoes, entered the house, and went upstairs.

"At least wash your face!"

"I know." With a half-hearted response to her big sister downstairs, she entered her second-floor bedroom. She closed the door, then collapsed onto her bed. Next to her pillow there were a number of stuffed animals she'd had since she was little; they were there to do what little they could to help her get restful sleep. Laying in a bed that smelled like her body scent, Saya's mind wandered.

What was that, again...?

What happened to me?

Okay, calm down. Let's sort this out, one bit at a time.

Fortunately, my head's clear now... Like it hasn't been for a while. Why? Because I slept.

I slept... Seriously? That's amazing.

I thought I was going to just waste away and die of insomnia, but I managed to sleep.

Aw, yeah...

"Ohhhhhh, thank goodness," Saya whispered in a low voice.

Now that she could get some sleep again, she could start to piece her crumbling life back together. Her studies, her relationships... she'd need to work at it to redeem herself, but that was nothing compared with the long bout of sleeplessness she'd been through.

It's really great... Yeah, this is totally good news.

So, what's the other news?

I woke up, still thinking someone I didn't know was my lover from the dream, and kissed her hard. Is that good news? Bad news?

Saya covered her face with both hands, letting out a deep sigh.

"That's a sex crime..."

It wasn't clear she'd be held accountable for her actions, but it had to be sexual harassment at the very least.

"Can we pretend it didn't happen...? No...? Did she notice...? She did, didn't she? No matter how I look at it..."

If that came to light, Saya could only guess that she might find herself in a difficult position going forward.

"I was convinced we were lovers at the time..."

That the love she had been so certain of in the dream went and rapidly dissipated about ten seconds after she woke up had been a shock, too. Thanks to that, she felt something like a sense of loss and lingering affection swirling around inside her chest. It was a completely baseless, unnecessary sense of loss, though.

That feeling of certainty that she was in love, and loved in return, that she tasted during the kiss... This had been the first time in the seventeen years of her life that she had experienced it.

Noticing that she had been unconsciously touching her lips, Saya moved her hand away from them, feeling awkward.

"Ugh, I dunno anymore."

Hugging her pillow, Saya groaned powerlessly.

"None of this makes sense..."

No, enough. I'm done. Thinking about it isn't helping.

There was one thing for certain, and that was that she could sleep again.

For now, just sleep. Sleep like before, and recover. Thinking about the difficult stuff can wait. The fact of the matter is, I'm already this tired...

Saya shut her eyes, shifting into an easier sleeping position, and breathed softly.

Breathe in... Breathe out...

Breathe in... Breathe out...

...

Not long after, Saya opened her eyes.

“...Huh?”

She couldn't sleep.

No different from any time before this, slumber showed no sign of coming for her.

3

When Saya opened the door, the school doctor looked up from the sandwich she was eating.

“Oh, Hokage-san.”

“Heya.” After a cursory bow, Saya’s eyes darted around the room. The curtain around the bed inside was drawn back, so no one was sleeping there today.

The school doctor looked hard at Saya’s face, her expression darkening. “You look like you’re having a hard time. Still can’t sleep?”

“Yeah...”

It had been two days since then; Saya was once again stricken with insomnia.

For a fleeting moment, slumber had come, but try as she might, she couldn’t seem to replicate the experience. Ultimately, the drowsy days began once again. Having been robbed of restful sleep once more when it had been right before her eyes, Saya’s irritation was already at its limit.

The school doctor peeked at the clock. “You want to rest here for the afternoon?”

“Oh, no. Uh, I had something to ask you,” Saya said with some hesitance. “The last time I was resting here, a girl I don’t know came in. She kinda had airy, long hair, and was probably shorter than me...”

Saya made vague gestures with both hands as she described her, then lowered her hands. “...That’s about all I know, though,” she concluded weakly. The school doctor got a suspicious look on her face.

“Airy and short? Anything else?”

Other than that... She had been soft, and smelled like sunshine, but Saya obviously was hesitant to say either of those things.

“It was only for a moment, so... I dunno.”

“So, why ask about that girl?”

“She suddenly fell into bed with me and started sleeping. I wanted to ask if you had any clue who she might be, but... Now I think about it, you wouldn’t know from just that, would you? Sorry.”

Saya turned to leave, but the school doctor called out to her.

“Could it be Konparu-san, maybe?”

“Konparu?” When Saya turned back, the school doctor nodded.

“If it is, it’s unusual she’d come to the health room. I believe she’s a second-year, like you, but she’s your polar opposite, in a way.”

“My polar opposite... How so?”

“Konparu-san would fall asleep anywhere and everywhere.”

Anywhere and everywhere. In the classroom during lectures, in the courtyard during lunch, and in the library after school.

This Konparu didn’t need to go out of her way to sleep in the health room’s bed. She had apparently been sighted sleeping everywhere in the school.

How enviable.

When Saya left the health room, she wandered the school aimlessly. By the time she realized it, it had been more than ten minutes since afternoon classes began.

As she walked the empty halls, she could hear voices coming from the classes in each of the rooms she passed by. The windows were frosted, so she couldn’t see inside all that well. She could only see vague shadows and hear muffled voices. From beyond the wall came the noisy sounds of a gaggle of girls taking class— it felt similar to walking past a tank at the aquarium. The moment they noticed she was here, dozens of eyes would swivel in her direction.

Thinking about that made her feel awkward; with quiet footsteps, Saya walked through the classroom building.

She didn’t feel like returning to her own class at this point. She’d kill time somewhere until the next break. *No, what am I even doing?* she suddenly

thought.

When she went from the classroom building into the corridor between buildings, the courtyard came into view. The rim of the dry fountain was a perfect height and width for sitting on, and would make the ideal spot for a midday nap, but it was visible from every window of the school building. It was class time, so if the teachers caught her, she'd be heading straight to the student guidance room.

While looking at the fountain—where no one was sitting—Saya remembered at last.

Right. I was searching for her.

Hitsuji Konparu... the airy girl.

In these two days of being tormented by insomnia once more, Saya had had a lot of time to think. Why had she been able to sleep just that one time? What was different about the situation?

Even with her mind dulled by drowsiness, the answer was clear. Hitsuji Konparu. The moment that girl had fallen into bed, she'd been suddenly dragged down into sleep.

Maybe I can sleep if it's with someone else...? That thought had led her to ask her big sister to sleep with her last night.

Not only had she not been able to sleep, her sister's tossing and turning caused her to fall out of bed.

That let her narrow down the answer even more.

"It has to be her," Saya mumbled indistinctly.

Where was Hitsuji Konparu, who was said to sleep anywhere and everywhere, right now?

Did she have a secret place where the teachers wouldn't find her? Or because it was class time, was she asleep at her desk? That would make what Saya was doing absolutely pointless, but looking around was still easier on her nerves.

Going through the corridor, she crossed over to the neighboring school building.

In the moment when her eyes were adjusting to moving from a bright place to a dark one, something strange appeared in Saya's vision.

It was like the keys of a keyboard instrument had stretched to be long and thin, had turned into legs, and were walking. It was something she couldn't quite place as a living being or a machine, and it was silently climbing the stairs.

"Hm?"

When she blinked and looked again, there was nothing left to see.

Was it an illusion?

It was true that when she had been deprived of sleep for a long time her eyes played more tricks on her, and she was plagued by strange visions, but something about it tugged at Saya's frayed psyche.

That thing just now... I've seen it somewhere...

No, but how could I have? Where would I even see something like that?

A game? A video online? A manga? A movie? A museum?

If not, then... a dream, maybe?

When her train of thought reached that point, a vague memory resurfaced.

Right! I saw it! That thing—I saw it in a dream!

Two days ago. That short dream in the health room... Just before I woke up, it entered my vision, with all those legs in a horizontal line...

Unconsciously, Saya had been heading to the roof, but the thing from before was nowhere to be seen. She only saw it for an instant, but it had definitely been climbing the stairs.

From out of her foggy memory, a single name surfaced.

"...It's a Suiju."

That's what she'd been calling it—a Suiju—though she had no idea what that meant.

Chasing after the Suiju, Saya climbed the stairs. The second floor was quiet and dimly lit, and the closest science room didn't seem to be in use. Looking up,

she could see it again. In the contrasting light of the dimly lit indoors and the bright outdoors, she caught sight of it for just a moment, many legs clicking along as it passed through the third floor and went even higher.

When she chased after it all the way up the stairs, she came to the door to the roof; it was bright on the other side of the frosted glass. She tried the doorknob and found it was unlocked, so she opened the door and went out on the roof.

There, Saya found Hitsuji Konparu.

4

Today, there was no wind, and the skies were completely clear. The sunlight was warm and soft. If she laid out in the sun for awhile, she wouldn't burn, and wouldn't catch a chill. In other words, it was the ideal day for an afternoon nap.

In this blessed weather, next to the fence that wrapped all the way around the roof, Hitsuji Konparu slept.

She was laying in such a way that the shade would fall on her face, and the sun would shine on her feet. There was a blanket over the lower half of her body, and her airy hair cascaded over the pillow beneath her head.

"...She's here," Saya mumbled, then snapped back to her senses and looked around; she found neither hide nor hair of the sui-ju. It concerned her that she didn't know what it had been, but Saya didn't have the composure right now to keep worrying about that.

Crossing the roof, she walked up to the sleeping Hitsuji Konparu, tip-toeing without realizing it.

When she got closer, she felt a sense that something was pulling her in.

Like her futon tempting her back to sleep in the morning. Or like the comfort of a secret soft bed. This wasn't just her imagination anymore. The force of attraction was growing stronger.

Her eyelids grew heavy. Her thoughts lost cohesion, and only the desire to lie next to the girl dominated her head...

Oh, I knew it.

This is it. This is what got me.

It really has to be her. If it's her, she can drag me into sleep.

With each step, sleep drew nearer—the restful sleep that Saya craved more than anything.

Suddenly, behind her was the sound of a door closing.

When she jumped a bit and turned around, a short-haired student was there; the school badge on the breast of her uniform marked her as a third-year. With a sharp look cast in Saya's direction, she opened her mouth.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The suddenness of it made Saya stand bolt upright. With her dulled wits, an instantaneous response was out of the question.

Perhaps growing impatient with Saya's meaningless "um"s and "er"s, the third-year seemed to walk pointedly towards her, only to interpose herself between Saya and Hitsuji Konparu instead.

"Get out."

"Uh, no," Saya replied.

"You should be in class now, shouldn't you? Hurry along."

I could say the same to you, was the thought that crossed Saya's mind, but arguing in her drowsy state took too much effort. Moving her clumsy tongue, Saya spoke.

"I was looking... for her."

"Why?"

"I... I wanna sleep with her."

Her feet moved of their own accord, and her body stumbled forward.

"Huh? What are you... Hey."

The third-year apparently tried to stop her, but Saya barely noticed. Hitsuji Konparu's horizontal form was like a black hole of sleep. When she closed in with two, three more steps, a wave of sleepiness struck her. Like a wolf in sheep's clothing suddenly opening its jaws, drowsiness rapidly seized Saya and pulled her in.

I knew it was her...!

While lying down next to Hitsuji Konparu, Saya was moved by a strong feeling akin to the satisfaction of a lightbulb moment.

When she knelt at the edge of the blanket, before lying down, Saya's

consciousness had already been swallowed up by the darkness.

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The hospital halls were congested, and many people were sitting on the leather benches against the walls, waiting for their turn to come. As I pushed my way through the crowd, no one paid any attention to me. The walls were plastered with posters about preventing the spread of infection, and they said to always gargle with coffee after waking from a nightmare. There was a long line in front of the coffee vending machine, and after gargling, the children were spitting their coffee out in the attached sink.

Opening the door to the examination room, my lover, who was wearing a nurse's uniform, poked her head out.

"Next," my lover said before noticing me. "Oh, you're late," she said with a smile, and I hugged her and gave her a kiss, like always.

"It doesn't taste like coffee," my lover said in an accusatory tone once our lips had parted.

"That's because I've never had coffee in my life."

"That's dangerous. There, look."

My lover pointed behind me. When I turned, all the patients were now gone, and the many-legged *suiju* was approaching down the white hall.

"It was drawn here, to your sleep. Get back. I'll take it out."

"It's fine," I said. "I can handle one like that."

I laid down a yellow pylon in front of the *suiju*, its legs clicking as it moved them, closing in. When I put a coin in the vending machine, hot coffee came out, so I threw it—cup and all—at the *suiju*. The *suiju* collapsed and spread out across the floor.

"How's that?" I asked.

When I turned around, quite proud with myself, my lover gave me a scrutinizing look. I was captivated by her sparkling eyes in spite of myself.

“You... Who are you?” Hitsuji Konbaru asked with knit brows.

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“Hahh?!”

Waking with a start, the first thing Saya saw was the face of Hitsuji Konparu, who was on top of her and looking down.

The affection she’d felt in the dream was fading, much like the last light of the setting sun. Hitsuji Konparu looked at her with an unchanging expression, her head tilted slightly to the side. Saya timidly opened her mouth.

“H-Hey.”

“Heeeey?”

When Hitsuji Konparu responded in such a way, Saya had no idea what she was thinking, and cringed.

“Um... Can I get up?”

“Gooood morning!”

“G-Good morning...”

She was kind of scary. The third-year from before entered a confused Saya’s vision from the side.

“Saya Hokage-san.”

“Huh? Yes!”

Why does she know my name? Saya started to wonder, then noticed her student handbook in the third-year’s hand.

“Hokage-san of Class 2-C, Roll Call No. 30. May I ask you to explain why you came here?”

Though she said, “May I ask you to,” her tone was not one that was asking for permission.

“Give that back.”

“Once you answer my questions properly, I will. This is an interrogation.”

“An interrogation?”

Hitsuji Konparu leaned in close, peering at her face. “So, your name’s Saya, huh? Have we met somewhere before?”

“Before, in the health room...”

Her eyes wandered in thought for a brief moment, before Hitsuji Konparu clapped her hands together.

“Ohh! From that time!”

“Y-Yeah.”

“The girl who kissed me out of nowhere for some reason!”

In response to that sudden fastball, Saya couldn’t come up with a single excuse.

“Uh, uh, that was, um...”

“Kissed you...? What’s this about?” The third-year furrowed her brow dubiously.

“I... I’m sorry!” Saya covered her face with both hands. With someone on top of her and no way to escape, that was about all she could do.

“I see... Your insomnia was that bad, huh?” The third-year said after listening to Saya explain her situation while kneeling. “And you say you’re fine now?”

“Yes... For some reason, when Konparu-san is next to me, I’m out like a light in seconds.”

“Just Hitsuji is fine. I’ll call you Saya.”

“Huh? I can’t treat you that informally so quickly like some sort of American.”

Hitsuji narrowed her eyes at the slightly disturbed Saya. “Even though you

kissed me?”

“Urkh.”

“Not even Americans kiss people they’ve just met for the first time, you know?”

“Urrrrkh.”

“They could get shot, right?” the third-year piped in.

“Or sued, yeah.”

“I-I said I was sorry, okay?”

Unsure how to deal with a grinning Hitsuji, Saya was at a loss.

Hitsuji suddenly took on a very polite tone of voice. “Black Player Konparu, sleeping together.”

“Huh?”

“White Player Hokage, kissing.”

“Guh.”

Hitsuji went on like this with an over-serious look on her face, like she was announcing moves in a shogi match.

“Black Player Konparu, taking an afternoon nap. White Player Hokage, sneaking into her target’s bed at night.”

“I-It’s not even night yet.”

With Saya’s breathing labored and her excuses—which were barely excuses—increasingly desperate, the third-year must have taken pity on her, because she stepped in. “Konparu-san, let’s leave it at that. Hokage-san, you too. Don’t worry too much.”

“But...”

“You were close to Konparu-san in the dream, right?”

“Y-Yes. Though we’d never met before.”

“I understand. In the gap between Dayland and Nightland, those sorts of inconsistencies can occur sometimes.”

“Co... Come again?”

While Saya was bewildered this sudden nonsensical stuff she was being told, this time the third-year brought her face up close to Saya’s.

“There are a number of things I’ll want to ask you about in detail. Hokage-san, how are you feeling?”

She felt... good. Amazing, actually. It had only been a brief sleep, but her thoughts were clear.

“I feel really good. Not tired at all, either.”

“How long did the insomnia persist for?”

“It started gradually last fall, until I couldn’t sleep at all... So, I guess about six months, maybe?”

“Six months!”

“Half a year?! Woah, that’s rough.” Hitsuji’s eyes were wide.

“If it went on that long, your cognitive level should have degraded to the point where you could barely manage your day-to-day lifestyle. Yet, you were still making it to school every day?”

“I was just barely able to keep walking and talking... I couldn’t follow lectures, and my grades cratered.”

The two of them looked at each other.

“This girl... She’s a Never Sleeper, isn’t she?”

“That’s what I was thinking, too. Konparu-san, what do you think after actually sleeping with her?”

“It wasn’t perfect, but she seemed to be able to act with lucidity in Nightland. It shocked me when she defeated the sui-ju.”

“Um... What are you talking about?”

They looked back to Saya, staring as if they were appraising her. “Want to try inviting her?” Hitsuji asked, watching Saya cringe.

“Are you sure? Is that what you want, Konparu-san?”

Hitsuji nodded.

“Okay.” The third-year returned Saya’s pilfered student handbook, giving her name as she did. “I’m Ran Aizome. A Sleepwalker, like Konparu-san.”

“Sleep... Walker?”

Seeing Saya’s confusion, Ran Aizome proceeded to explain.

“I think you have potential. You’re probably a rare Neversleeper, too. How about it? If you cooperate with us, I think we can provide you with restful sleep.”

5

Sleepwalker.

A patient who experiences sleepwalking, also referred to as somnambulism.

This is a condition in which the afflicted gets out of bed during sleep and wanders around in an unconscious state; it is one type of sleep disorder.

This was what Saya learned when she looked it up later, but what Ran Aizome was talking about didn't sound like any mere gathering of people with sleep disorders.

"We Sleepwalkers act in secret to protect people as they sleep. This isn't widely known, but the slumber of humanity is menaced by *suiju*."

"*Suiju*..." Saya murmured.

"The thing you defeated in your sleep. It's written with the kanji *sui*, which means sleep, and *ju*, which means beast."

"Hey, Ran," Hitsuji interrupted. "You know you can't dump info on her all at once like that. Saya-chan will freeze up."

"She's not going to believe us easily, so rather than try and drip-feed it to her, it's better to give her all of it at once."

"Is that not a tad violent?" Hitsuji asked.

"This is a girl that kissed a total stranger like you out of nowhere," Ran noted.

"I guess you've got a point."

"Hey!" Saya tried to object, but Ran continued on, unconcerned.

"It's a Sleepwalker's duty to defeat *suiju*, but we each have different roles we're suited to. You probably have the potential to be a Neversleeper. They're the rare few who are not affected by dreams because they never sleep, which makes them a valuable asset in the battle against the *suiju*. That being said, Hokage-san... Won't you work with us?"

“Th-This is all kind of sudden.”

As if she had anticipated Saya’s refusal, Ran nodded instantly. “Yes, of course. It’s too much to ask you believe us, and I don’t intend to spend time on persuading you, either. If you change your mind, come here.”

With that said, Ran passed her a point card made of thick paper. On it was written the name of a store—Sakaimori Beds & Bedding—along with its address and telephone number.

“Could you stand up for a bit? I want to fold up the blanket,” Hitsuji said, still looking vacantly at the card.

“Uh, sure...”

In front of Saya, who stood up on unsteady legs as she had been asked to, Hitsuji folded up her blanket with practiced technique and picked it up.

Turning to Saya, Ran smiled faintly. “Well, feel free to sleep on it. If you can sleep, that is.”

Leaving behind what sounded vaguely like a threat, Ran Aizome turned to go.

“Everyone will be there tomorrow. Later.”

Hitsuji followed after Ran, leaving Saya all alone on the rooftop.

“What’s with her...?” Saya mumbled.

While she stood there feeling mildly humiliated, the bell echoed across the rooftop. Looking over at the clock, Saya realized that sixth period had ended at some point.

The next day, after school, Saya was walking to the beds and bedding store that’s name was written on the point card she’d been given.

In the end, she hadn’t been able to sleep yesterday. It was frustrating, but things went exactly as Ran Aizome had said. Saya was as afflicted by insomnia as ever, and not only was she unable to attain the deep slumber she had tasted next to Hitsuji, she wasn’t even able to doze lightly.

*If you cooperate with us, I think we can provide restful sleep—*Those words of

Ran's lacked credibility on their own, but if Hitsuji was with her, that was another matter entirely.

Setting aside all that dodgy talk about sui-ju and Sleepwalkers, that sweet, beautiful sleep had been the truth. As if clinging desperately to it, Saya's feet led her towards the address indicated on the card.

From what she'd been able to look up online, Sakaimori Bed & Bedding did, in fact, exist. She tried calling ahead, but the phone just kept ringing without even going to an answering machine.

With the address as her guide, she walked while looking down at a map app, gradually ending up in a more and more deserted area of town.

"Is this really the right way...?"

After passing through a dark shopping street lined with shuttered shops, she came to a deserted block of warehouses where a large truck would occasionally drive by, almost touching the sidewalk. Trudging along under a cloudy sky, she grew more and more worried.

Am I going to be okay? This doesn't feel okay. I mean, huh? That stuff she was talking about yesterday... What WAS that? Sleepwalkers? Is that her... fictional setting?

Is it a game they're really into...? Like some sort of acting? Well, they can do what they want, but I'm not really interested. If I can't fix my insomnia, I'll have bigger problems. She wants me to cooperate... but how, exactly? Will I really be able to get a good night's sleep? If she was just making stuff up, I'm not going to let her get away with it.

But the whole kiss thing wasn't good. Now they've got dirt on me...

Saya, who had been thinking gloomily to herself as she walked, raised her head and looked around.

Though it wasn't all that different from the surrounding buildings, a large warehouse with a black roof caught her eye. It appeared as though that was the destination marked on her map. The shutter to the delivery entrance was down, and the concrete in the parking lot in front of the building was full of cracks with weeds growing out of them. Next to the shutter was a small door with an

unremarkable sign that read “Sakaimori Beds & Bedding.”

She approached the door and tried to get a feel for the place. There was a glass window she could peer through, but the inside was too dark for her to see well.

There was an intercom by the door, so after a moment’s hesitation, Saya tried knocking.

There was no response, and no sign of anyone moving around inside, either.

When she tried testing the doorknob—it opened.

“Excuse meeee...”

Calling out timidly, she took a step inside.

“Helloooo...?”

On the other side of the door was a short hallway. Metal lockers, dead potted plants, and a dust-covered oil stove were gathered together against one of the walls. On the left side of the hallway was a sliding door, and it led into the area with the delivery entrance.

While she was squinting and looking for a light switch, someone called out from behind her.

“Saya!”

She jumped up into the air in surprise. Turning around to look, she saw Hitsuji Konparu standing at the entrance. The moment she saw Saya’s face, Hitsuji’s eyes went wide.

“Woah! Your face looks awful!”

“Huh?! ”

That naturally-delivered insult pissed Saya off. Hitsuji reached and flicked the light switch, as if she was used to doing it. With the lights now on, she scrutinized Saya’s face once more.

“Those are some serious bags under your eyes. Couldn’t you sleep?”

“You heard my story yesterday, and you still ask that? I haven’t slept in forever, okay?! ”

“You looked a lot more relaxed after sleeping with me.”

Saying that like it was no big deal, Hitsuji walked past Saya and went inside. The door closed behind the two of them.

“I’m glad you came. Usually, when we try to recruit a girl like you, they don’t believe us.”

“I don’t really believe you...”

At some point, Hitsuji had pulled out a key and used it to unlock the sliding door.

“Help me out. This door’s heavy.”

“Uh, okay.”

With Saya helping out as directed, the two of them pulled open the heavy door. Once the door opened with a rumbling sound, Hitsuji went into the darkness inside and flipped another switch.

Starting with the ones closest to them first, the lights hanging from the high ceiling flickered on.

It was like a trade exhibition for beds and bedding, or if it wasn’t that, something of a theme park. The massive warehouse was filled with beds, futons, hammock, and more, all of various sizes, and laid out such that there was a certain distance between each of them.

Hitsuji led Saya onward as they walked between the beds and bedding.

“Well? I bet you’ve never seen anything like this before, huh?” Hitsuji sounded a little proud.

“I have.”

“Huh? Where?”

“The beds and bedding department at IKEA.”

Hitsuji pursed her lips unhappily. “I don’t think you’re very cute, Saya.”

“Well, sorry.”

Although they continued to walk, the rows of beds and bedding showed no

sign of ending, and even Saya was forced to admit the impressive scale of the place. When they finally reached the edge, there were shelves with still-wrapped mattresses and blankets that rose up all the way to the ceiling and formed a wall that stood in their way.

While walking through the passageways of shelves, which made Saya feel as though she had stepped into a labyrinth, they suddenly came out into a more open area. In the center of that space, surrounded by four shelves, there were three beds lined up. The bedside tables had reading lamps, manga, and textbooks laid out on them, and a little distance away there were bags of candy on the table of a sofa set. In the corner, there was a gas stove and a sink, along with a refrigerator and a cupboard for tableware.

“The toilet’s over there.” Hitsuji pointed to the edge of the shelf on their right then picked up a mug from the coffee table. Throwing her bag down on the sofa, she started washing the cup in the sink.

“Saya could you put on the kettle for me?”

“Huh?”

“Let’s have tea and wait for everyone else to come. If you prefer coffee, that’s fine, too.”

“...Okay.”

She put water in the kettle that was on top of the stove and turned on the flame. There were tea leaves and instant coffee in a basket on the table.

“Use whichever you like.”

Taking Hitsuji up on the offer, she chose chamomile. It was an herbal tea she’d heard was good for getting restful sleep... Not that the copious amounts of the stuff that she had consumed at home had done anything more than make her feel a little better.

The kettle started whistling, so she put the teabag into the teapot and poured the water in. Hitsuji, meanwhile, was putting rice crackers into a wooden sweets box.

“Yuki no Yado?” Saya asked.

“They’re sweet and salty, so they go with just about everything.”

Once Saya poured tea for the two of them, the fragrance of herbs filled the air. Hitsuji’s mug was gold-colored with a lamb character drawn on it. Saya’s mug was possibly meant for visitors, because it was a nondescript white. She felt like she’d seen ones like this being sold for cheap at IKEA.

Unable to take the silence as they sat facing each other, sipping tea on the sofa, Saya spoke up.

“What is this place?”

“Our bedroom. And our workplace, too.”

“By work, you mean as... Sleepwalkers, was it?”

“Yeah, that. We even earn money for it sometimes, so it really is work.”

Saya was surprised, and her eyes raced around the room once more. If it was true that they were just playing around, then this place was a bit much.

“So, it’s true, then. Uh, about the sui-ju, and all the other stuff.”

“Of course.”

“O-Oh, yeah?”

“You look worried,” Hitsuji said teasingly.

For a moment, Saya considered saying something back, but it was true that she had no idea what was going on, and that worried her. When Saya hung her head, Hitsuji continued in a somewhat gentler tone.

“When everyone’s here, we’ll explain. Don’t you worry.”

While she was munching away at the glazed rice crackers for lack of anything better to do, they eventually heard footsteps approaching from somewhere far off in the warehouse.

Not long after, a girl came out of the maze of shelves. It was a quiet-looking girl who wore glasses, and she was dressed in casual clothing.

“Ohh, I’m sorry I’m late... Wait, it’s just the two of you?”

“No need to panic, Tencho,” Hitsuji said.

“Konparu-san, you’re early today... Huh? Who is this?”

“Uh, hi...”

“This girl’s Saya. She’s nightkissed, and a candidate to become a new member.”

“Oh, so that’s it! Nice to meet you. I’m Midori Sakaimori.” The girl hurriedly bowed her head.

“You see, Midori-chan here, she’s next in line to inherit this bed and bedding store. That’s why we call her Tencho.”

Short for store manager, huh?

The next sound they heard approaching was of something rolling across the concrete.

When the next person slid in, it was a girl with a ponytail. She was wearing another school’s uniform with a parka over top. When Saya realized she was wearing roller shoes, the kind with a wheel in the heel, she was a little surprised. They were in style when she was in elementary school, but this was the first she’d ever seen someone in high school still wearing them.

“Yo. Huh, a new member?”

“Yep, that’s right. Saya, this girl is—”

“Kaede Tokishima. Nice to meet’cha.”

No sooner had she introduced herself when Ran Aizome came out from another passageway.

“Looks like everyone’s here.”

“Ahh!”

While the other four, which included Saya, were still surprised, Ran sat down on the sofa with an impassive look on her face. From the feeling the other girls around the table were giving off, Saya figured it out, too. Ran was the boss of this team.

6

“We Sleepwalkers have special powers that let us act freely while we sleep,” Ran began once everyone had their black tea and tea cakes. “Every human being is connected through sleep, and we travel through it like it's one world. You might say we're walking around a collective consciousness.”

“The collective unconscious...”

Saya had heard of this somewhere before. If she remembered correctly, it was a theory that said every person was connected on an unconscious level, and that was why legends from around the world shared common symbols.

“Normal people lose their will during sleep. Even when their level of consciousness rises, they merely become aware of their situation as a dream. Ruled by memories and emotions, they are unable to control themselves. However, once in a while, someone regains their self while dreaming.”

“Haven't you ever had a dream where you realized you were dreaming, Saya?” Hitsuji asked.

“I might have... maybe. I woke up right away, though.”

“Coming to the realization you're dreaming, and then maintaining the state of sleep is not easy. However, with the appropriate training, the amount of time you can stay in the dream will grow longer. This makes lucid dreaming without time limits possible,” Ran continued. “Thus, once you're able to act freely in your sleep, there is a vast world of dreams that opens up to you. The Australian aborigines referred to this as Dream Time. We distinguish the two by calling the world of sleep Nightland, and the waking world Dayland.”

“You can do anything in Nightland,” Kaede Tokishima, who was sitting cross-legged on the sofa, said while munching away at a Yuki no Yado rice cracker. “You know lucid dreams? When someone figures out they're dreaming, they can control the dream. They can fly, make a character they like appear, even transform themselves. Anything they want. It's insanely fun.”

“If they go overboard, they can lose control, and then lose lucidity as a result, though,” Midori Sakaimori said while blowing on her cup of black tea to cool it down. “Since you can do anything, you’d want to eat cakes and all the other stuff you like, right? But replicating the sense of taste is pretty hard. I try to do it every time I’m in Nightland, but there’s just no texture or taste. It’s like I’m eating tissues...”

“You just don’t have enough spirit, Tencho.”

“That’s not true. I give it my all, but nothing tastes good. It’s so, so frustrating...” Midori turned an upset look towards Kaede.

“We’re not putting ourselves in danger for all-you-can-eat cake. We Sleepwalkers have a proper mission we’ve set out to accomplish,” Ran said.

“And that’s where defeating the suiju comes in?” Saya asked. Ran nodded.

“Precisely. In Nightland, the suiju—the beings known as sandbeasts, run rampant.”

“Sandbeasts? Beasts of... sand?”

“They were called sandmen in past. The sandman is a fairy that shows up in German folklore — He casts sand into people's eyes, making them fall asleep...”

“Sounds like the old witch, Sunakake Baba,” Hitsuji interjected.

“I think Sunakake Baba just throws sand in your eyes, though... The suiju’s actions showed too little intelligence for them to be called sandmen, so at some point they came to be called sandbeasts instead.”

Beasts... The one Saya had witnessed had certainly taken a form that was far from anything that might be called human. That said, it didn’t look anything like a beast, either. “I don’t really care what you call them, but what exactly are the suiju?” she asked.

“They’re beings that put their roots down in humans, eating into their sleep, and spreading like mold across Nightland. You could call them autonomous dreams, or parasites of the psyche.”

“Eating into their sleep... Is that what’s causing my insomnia?”

“Yes. You most likely have an allergy to suiju. When there are suiju nearby,

you are unable to get to sleep, and that drives you into a state of sleeplessness.”

“It’s like you were keeping a cat without ever knowing you were allergic.” Kaede’s metaphor left Ran was unamused.

“Cats are much cuter than suiju, you know.”

“What, that’s the problem?”

“Well, not that it matters... Anyway, those humans who are infected by suiju will have their spirits trapped in Nightland. Eventually, they enter a state where they have no self and act as carriers, spreading suiju across Dayland. If we leave them be, many humans will be infected, and they’ll begin to eat away at Nightland itself, so we need to stop the infection early.”

“So... Are you saying I was about to become one of those carriers, too? Saya asked, but Ran shook her head.

“I think you would have taken a different course, Hokage-san. Because of your suiju allergy, you were unable to enter Nightland, so the suiju parasite would have gone on wearing down your body and soul, and... sooner or later, you would have died.”

To Saya, those words didn’t sound like hyperbole at all. In fact, she was able to accept them pretty easily. *What do you mean, “No one ever died from being unable to sleep?” Liars! I would’ve died after all!*

“Um, are you all right?” Saya must have gone awfully pale or something of the sort, because Midori was staring at her with concern.

“Uhh, yeah... Thanks.”

“It’s amazing you made it half a year! I’d be dead in three days,” Hitsuji said.

“Nah, that’s way too soon. You gotta hang in there for a week, at least,” Kaede poked fun at Hitsuji.

“You had it rough, Hokage-san, but you’ll be fine now. We Sleepwalkers exist to help people like you!” Ran said, puffing her chest up with pride. “And on that note, I’d like to reintroduce everyone. The four of us here are this town’s Sleepwalkers. I’m the leader, Ran Aizome.”

Still sitting on the sofa, Ran began pointing to each of the other girls in turn and introducing them. “Konparu-san is a Blanket. When she lies side-by-side with someone, she can put them to sleep in no time. She’s a professional at putting people to sleep.”

“A professional at putting people to sleep...?”

“When I’m sleeping, the people around me fall asleep, too. There was even a time I drifted off in class, and when I woke up everyone else was out cold.”

“Whaa...? Why didn’t the teacher wake them?”

“Because the teacher was asleep, too.”

So that’s why she was sleeping in the health room and on the roof, not in class. One of Saya’s questions had been solved. The moment she was satisfied with that answer, words carelessly slipped out of her mouth. “So I’m not the only one who gets sleepy when they’re with Konparu-san, huh.”

“It happens to everyone. Why?”

“Er...”

When she was asked why, Saya didn’t really know.

I wonder why I said that. I mean, I wonder why I thought it would only be me...

“Is it a problem somehow if you’re not the only one?”

Hitsuji looked probingly at Saya.

“It’s not a problem, but... It’s nothing really.”

While Saya was still confused, Ran continued with introductions. “Tokishima-san is a Pillowfighter. That’s a Sleepwalker who’s skilled at fighting in Nightland.”

“F-Fighting?”

“That’s right. Suiju can be pretty aggressive, you know. You let your guard down, they’ll take you out. I’m a little better than everyone else at controlling dreams to fight, so I’ll show you the ropes, Sayacchi.” Kaede gave a flawless smile.

“Midori is a Bedmaker. Her job is to handle beds, bedding, and all the other

related equipment. She works behind the scenes to arrange a good sleeping environment for us, as well as looking after us while we're doing a Sleepwalk."

"U-Um, if anything feels wrong while you're sleeping, tell me. I think I can help," Midori said humbly with a slight bow of her head.

With all four of them looking at her, Saya squirmed awkwardly on the sofa.

"Erm... Is this everyone? Just the four of you?"

"Right. We'll have five if you join," Ran said, leaning across the table. "Like I said yesterday, you have the potential to be a Neversleeper. That's someone who's lost sleep, and can enter dreams without being affected by them. Among the Nightkissed, the people who've been bitten by a suiju, sometimes a person will awaken special abilities."

"...What are you telling me to do?"

When Saya faltered, Kaede didn't hesitate in speaking up. "You don't have to think hard about it — this is a respectable job people have been doing forever. We dive into Nightland and take out the suiju that infect people. We're heroes!"

Is it that simple...? While Saya was hesitating, Ran rose from the sofa and began speaking.

"Well then, should we sleep together now?"

"Huh?"

"Whatever you're ultimately going to do, Hokage-san, first we have to eliminate the suiju that's infected you."

"No, I'm fine with that, but what do you mean by sleep together...?"

"Didn't I tell you? By sleeping side-by-side, Sleepwalkers are able to share their sleep. You've already experienced that, haven't you?"

7

When the other four rose from their seats, Saya timidly followed suit.

Turning to the three beds that had been pushed together, Kaede asked, “Hey, leader, are we gonna use these beds again today?”

“Is there a problem with that?” Ran asked.

“Well, we’ve got Sayacchi, so I was thinking we could change them.”

“Oh... Hokage-san, are you a clean freak? You’re not, right? We’re good here.”

“Why did you ask? I don’t like that you decided my answer for me before I could even give one,” Saya murmured.

“You went to sleep hugging Konparu-san, so you’re clearly not,” Ran scoffed.

“Urgh...”

Saya ended up looking to Hitsuji for help, but Hitsuji acted like it wasn’t her problem. Thinking about it, expecting Hitsuji to bail her out was wrong. If anything, Hitsuji had been the victim in that situation.

“Um, what kind of bedding do you like, Hokage-san?” Midori asked. “It can be a bed or a futon. If you have a preference on the stuffing of your pillow, or the material of your sheets... Anything to do with the type of bedding you like, I think I can get pretty much anything you want.”

Oh, yeah. This girl was the equipment expert, wasn’t she? While internally she was relieved by the change of topic, Saya still cocked her head to the side.

“Hrmm... I don’t really know, to be honest,” Saya admitted. “I tried changing my pillow, along with a bunch of other things, while I was trying to overcome my insomnia, but none of it had any effect.”

“I see, I see. Well, I guess Hitsuji-chan’s your favorite sleeping accessory now, huh.”

“Wha...!”

After having said something incredible as if it was no big deal, Midori smiled and handed a new toothbrush to a now speechless Saya.

“You should brush your teeth before bed. I’ll give you this.”

“I’ll be using the sink first.” Hitsuji produced a toothbrushing set from her bag and headed for the kitchen. Saya was standing there vacantly while holding the toothbrush, but she finally snapped back to her senses and turned to Ran.

“Just how long are we going to sleep? How many hours...?”

“Good question. Why don’t we do three hours for a start? Everyone is a little different, but generally sleep works in 90-minute cycles, going from shallow to deep and back again. If we plan our Sleepwalks around that as a guideline, it works out well.”

Saya looked at the clock. It was 4:00 P.M. Three hours from now, it would already be dark out.

“Will your folks be okay with that? You should contact them before you go to sleep,” Kaede said, flicking her finger across the display of her smartphone. Saya did as suggested, and fired off a message to her sister saying she’d be late getting home.

Brushing her teeth with the toothbrush provided, she rinsed out her mouth, then came back over to the beds. Everyone took off their coats, undid their ribbons or neckties, loosened their collars and sleeves, and got ready to sleep. They each had a basket for their clothes, and they discarded the clothes they had taken off into them.

“Here, use this.” When Midori gave her a basket, Saya hesitantly began undressing, too. Midori was moving around and working busily, changing the sheets for new ones, setting the alarm clock on the bedside table, and more. She was looking up, with a serious expression on her face, as she adjusted the angle of an air circulator. That made Saya look up, too, and she noticed there was a large industrial air conditioner installed up on the high ceiling. It seemed Midori was making adjustments to keep the air from blowing directly on the beds.

Kaede jumped right into bed. “Sayacchi, you good now? C’mon, c’mon!”

“R-Right.”

I have no idea how to handle this! Saya thought. When she was being asked to sleep with people she was meeting for the first time, how was she supposed to act? It was true that they were just going to be sleeping side-by-side, but she’d gotten more and more tense as she prepared to do so.

“Pardon me...”

“Come in, come in,” Kaede urged.

Hesitantly, Saya got in bed. From the lower point of view, the bed felt awfully wide. There were three queen sized beds lined up with no gaps between them, covered by a massive sheet she could only assume had been custom ordered. There were pillows of various sizes, blankets, and towel-blankets of many colors placed randomly on top of the beds.

“There’s five of us, so it’s probably gonna get hot, but you should put something over your belly at least. You’ll get the runs if you don’t,” Kaede, who was already lying on her back, said.

Ran got into bed next. She was dressed lightly, wearing a sleeveless top and shorts.

“You got changed,” Saya said to Ran.

“My uniform gets wrinkled otherwise. You should bring a set of pajamas, too, Hokage-san. Or you could have Midori pick one out for you, too.”

“No, it’s not like it’s a sure thing I’ll be joining yet...” While Saya was mumbling to herself, Hitsuji energetically plopped herself down next to her, making the bed shake.

“You don’t know when to give up, huh, Saya.” Hitsuji had at some point apparently changed into a pair of Chinese-style pajamas.

“Midori! You hurry up, too!”

“O-Okay!”

Ran must have decided she was satisfied that their sleeping environment was

in order, because she called for Midori, who got into bed with them, too. Even with all five of them in bed, there was plenty of space, and they could move around.

“Now then, you take the center, Hokage-san,” Ran suggested, and Saya got flustered.

“Huh? Me?”

“Of course she means you,” Hitsuji said. “You’re the guest of honor at this party, Saya. Come on, come on.”

With Hitsuji rushing her, too, Saya was pushed into the center of the beds.

“Uh... What do I do here?”

“Please sleep in whatever position you want. On your back, your belly, your side, anything goes. Do you want to use a hug pillow?”

“No, I don’t need one... probably.”

She lay on her back, her head resting on a large pillow. The other four lay surrounding Saya, each in the position they preferred. The one thing in common though was that their heads were all turned towards Saya.

When Midori reached out and fiddled with a remote control on the bedside table, the lights went out one after another. Once it was dark, only a small lamp on the coffee table a little ways away continued to cast a soft light.

Hitsuji was right beside her, so Saya had anticipated falling asleep right away, but the drowsiness just wasn’t coming for some reason. Even once the lights were turned out, she was too excited to sleep—it was almost like she was on a school trip. When she thought of it that way, the way they were in a group of nothing but girls trying to get sleep was similar, too.

“...Um,” Saya opened her mouth and broke the silence. “I’m not falling asleep in seconds like last time, huh.”

“Are you taking it easy today, Konparu-san?” Ran asked, still lying down.

“Since we’re lucky enough to have Saya joining us this time, I was thinking there’s no need to hurry,” Hitsuji answered. “I mean, doesn’t rushing to get to sleep feel like such a waste?”

"It *is* our first time going to sleep together, after all."

"Yeah, exactly."

"Konparu-san's Blanket ability is really something. She's suppressing it most of the time, but I bet if she wanted to, she could have it affect as wide an area as she wants."

"I've actually gotten pretty good at controlling it, you know," Hitsuji said, sounding just a little proud. Ran turned to Saya and smiled.

"Don't worry, just relax. The drowsiness will come soon enough, so just let it carry you away. You don't have to think hard about anything. Just sleep normally..."

"I don't even remember how to do that anymore," Saya mumbled.

"It's okay if you want to keep talking. No matter what you do, as long as I'm here, everyone's going to end up sound asleep," Hitsuji replied.

"She's right, you know. Hokage-san, if there's anything you wanted to ask, now's a good time. I'm sure you have all sorts of questions," Ran offered. Saya thought for a moment.

"Okay, then... How long has all this been going on for?"

"You mean the Sleepwalkers? There have been people serving the same role since ancient times. At my place, there's ancient documents from the Heian period that talk about spells to be cast on a dreamer's pillow and more."

"At your house, senpai?"

"Right. My house is a shrine. I hear we've had ties to the Sakaimore family since long ago, but..."

"When my grandmother—the previous owner of this store—passed on, I was forced to take over the business in a hurry," Midori finished for her. "Ran-chan had inherited knowledge about Sleepwalkers, so we started working together. That's why it was just me and Ran in the beginning."

"What about Konparu-san and Tokishima-san?"

“They rescued me and Hitsuji when we were about to get taken out by Suiju. That’s why our situation’s just like yours, Sayacchi.”

“So that’s how it was...”

With that discussion dying off, silence descended for a short while. When she opened her mouth to speak again, Saya’s voice sounded a little drowsy.

“Why is it just girls, though? I was wondering that, at first.”

“...Right.” There was a slight pause before Ran responded.

“Considering we all sleep side-by-side like this, I can see why it’s this way, of course, now.”

“Yeah...”

“So, I was thinking. We’re all girls here, but if there are other Sleepwalkers, and they’re in the same sort of group, do you think there’s a group of boys somewhere sleeping side-by-side like this?”

“Yeah, that! That’s the stuff.” Kaede said, raising her voice. Her speech was maybe a little slurred, though. “I want to see that so bad. An all-male group of Sleepwalkers. Hey, I could even draw them myself. As a doujinshi.”

“I’d like to read it.” The drowsy voice belonged to Midori.

“Ehh, I dunno.”

“Then why did you say you’d do it...?”

“I mean, that was just, you know...”

With a little help from the idle banter, Saya’s mind was starting to feel more and more drowsy and indistinct. It was as if her consciousness was sinking into the center of her head, creating a sort of dizzying sensation.

Seeming to pick up on that, Hitsuji whispered, “Good night.”

And with those two words serving as the trigger, a moment later, Saya’s consciousness was pulled down into sleep.

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In between the mountains, there lived a dragon. And yet, for the longest time, the villagers had remained unaware of that fact.

One evening, a pharmacist was trying to take a shortcut home through the dry gulch. That was the first time anyone noticed the great flying lizard laying there. The pharmacist was scared stiff, but the dragon merely looked on, uninterested, its eyes only half open.

The pharmacist—relieved to find she had not been burned to cinders by the creature’s fiery breath and that it didn’t seem like it was about to reach out with its neck and devour her whole—hesitantly approached the dragon. She was interested as to why the dragon did not move. When she asked what it was doing here, the dragon replied.

“It has been a long time since flowers bloomed in this valley. As I am sure you know, we dragons eat flowers. I have lived for thousands of years feeding on lilies, but if the flowers will not bloom, then there is nothing I can do. Nothing but rot away in this fruitless valley.”

The dragon telling this sad story had scales that were a beautiful white, and its long tail and wingtips were a pale yellow. Its deep yellow eyes sparkled. When she looked upon it, the pharmacist said, “You should take a look at yourself. In devouring all the flowers of the valley, you have become the flowers yourself,” the pharmacist said when she looked upon the body of the dragon.

Peering into the hand mirror proffered by the pharmacist, the dragon said, “I see, so that’s it. It’s no wonder there are no flowers left to eat. I already am the lilies. However, I wonder... What am I to do now? I have lived many long years as a lily-eating dragon, so I know no other way of life. Human, if you know, could you tell me?”

By the time those words had finished being spoken, the dragon was no more, and what had been the dry gulch was now a field full of flowers.

“This is a lily flower from that valley,” I told Hitsuji as I handed her a single lily. Hitsuji accepted the lily, closing her eyes and bringing it close to her face.

“What a lovely scent. It’s so thick it’s making me dizzy.”

“Are you all right, my beloved, my shining wool that swaddles me?” Saya asked. “It’s all right if you want to lie down. The grassy mattress will embrace us gently, I am sure. There is no bed in the world better than the one on which the flower-eating dragon once rested.”

“My precious Saya, you are truly wonderful. But let us save that for another time.”

“Whatever makes you say that? We are all alone in this valley of lilies. What is there to be embarrassed about?” Saya asked.

“Ohh, Saya, my darling, take note of the mirror you carry.”

When she said that to me, I peered into the mirror. Nothing was reflected on its silver surface; I tilted my head to the side inquisitively.

“What does this mean, my beloved?”

“Give me your hand, Saya.”

Doing as I was told, I offered my hand to Hitsuji, who then pulled my finger, causing it to stretch with no resistance. Ten centimeters, then twenty centimeters, it stretched without any pain or anything seeming odd about it. Suddenly, I had an epiphany and shouted out loud.

“Ah?! This is a dream!”

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“Ah!” Saya awoke with a start.

In a dark warehouse, illuminated by a lamp on the nearby coffee table, there were four bodies lying on a bed. Saya’s panting intermingled with their quartet of soft breaths.

Hesitantly, she looked down to Hitsuji, who was next to her. Hitsuji furrowed her brow in her sleep, before she reached out to place her hand lightly on Saya's chest.

"Not yet... Don't run away..."

Saya's whole world tilted, and she was dragged back down into slumber.

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I had fallen, my cheek pressed to the sandy ground of the Colosseum. The weighted net meant for fighting wrapped around me more and more as I struggled with it. When the gladiator—my opponent—raised a three-pronged spear, the crowd went wild.

Finish her! the crowd roared. When the emperor, who was sitting up in a reserved seat, raised a hand, a hush fell over the crowd as their shouting receded like the tide. Then, as thousands looked on breathlessly, the emperor gave the thumbs down, and the crowd let out another great cheer.

The gladiator saluted the emperor, then walked over to my immobile self and thrust the three-pronged spear into my back.

There was no pain— it was just hard to breathe. I was ready to cry from the sense of powerless and shock that I was going to die like this, and then the gladiator spoke.

"Uh, hey Sayacchi. You all right there?"

"...Huh?"

Looking up, there was Kaede in the form of a gladiator, crouching and looking down at me. The spear that I was sure she'd stabbed into my back was nowhere to be seen.

"Tokishima... san."

"That's me, Sayacchi. I finally caught you. This is a dream— do you

understand?”

“I get it, but it’s hard to breathe,” I said through labored breaths.

“She says she’s having trouble breathing. Midori!!!.”

No sooner did I think I'd heard the sound of a siren than an ambulance drove out onto the sandy floor of the arena. Stepping out of the driver’s seat in a paramedic’s uniform was Midori. She knelt on the ground and began speaking to me.

“It’s okay—this happens all the time. If there’s a hand resting on your belly in Dayland, the slight discomfort is amplified in your sleep, and it can give you awful nightmares. Just calm down and breathe easy.”

Breathe in... Breathe out...

Breathe in... Breathe out...

“That’s the way. When you have trouble breathing, just remain calm, and focus.”

“O-Okay.”

“You’ll never suffocate in your dreams. The worst that can happen is you wake up. It looks like you should be fine now.”

When she told me that, I noticed that, at some point, I had stood up on the sand. There was no one in the audience now— only the emperor, up in a reserved seat.

The emperor, who was actually Hitsuji wearing laurels and a toga, jumped nimbly down onto the sand. Striding over, she looked up at me.

“I told you it was a dream. It wasn’t nice of you to run away like that.”

“Sorry. It surprised me.”

Thinking her pouting face was cute, I planted a kiss on Hitsuji’s forehead.

“Oh, my.” Kaede’s eyes bulged out, and she let out a cry of surprise.

“Huh? Huh? Were you two always that close?” Midori asked, surprised. Hitsuji and I looked to one another with a laugh.

“Yeah,” Hitsuji told her. “I wonder why.”

“I know, right?” I agreed. “I wonder, too.”

“Oho, I seeeeeeee...” Kaede brought a hand up to her mouth. She seemed to be having fun.

“Saya, I’ll teach you a simple technique to find out if you’re in a dream. Let’s call this lesson one.”

“Sure. What is it, Hitsuji-sensei?”

“This is a famous method for having lucid dreams. Look at your own hands.”

“My hands?” I did as she said, opening both my hands and looking down at them.

“There aren’t many things you’re more likely to look at on a day-to-day basis than your hands, right? But their shape is super complicated. When you look at your hands, I think it probably puts just the right amount of strain on the brain. If you pull on a finger, it will change shape easily, so you can find out if you’re dreaming right away.”

“It’s true!” I cried out despite myself as my index finger stretched to double its normal length. When I let go of the hand I’d stretched out, my finger snapped back to normal, like the power cord on a vacuum cleaner reeling itself in.

“Looking in a mirror like you did the first time works, too. In most cases, mirrors in dreams don’t work. No clue why, though.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“I think messing around with your hands is good practice for learning how to transform in dreams, too. Once you get used to it, you can even do stuff like this!” Kaede said, spreading her arms wide. They sprouted feathers in an instant, turning into the wings of a bird of prey with a wingspan of about three meters. Now there was a beautiful monster with the face of a woman and the body of a bird standing on the sandy floor of the arena. Kaede beat her wings, creating a sandstorm as her body floated into the air. When she set down on the roof of the ambulance, her scaly talons easily opened holes in the body of

the vehicle. Her monstrous weight blew out all four tires, and the vehicle sank.

“Heheh, how’s that?” Kaede asked smugly.

“Wow... You’re so pretty,” I murmured.

“I know, right?” Kaede puffed up her avian chest with pride.

“Please, don’t be such a show-off, Kaede-san,” Midori said, exasperated.

“I’m not!”

“Setting that aside... Where’s our leader?” Hitsuji looked about busily.

“I’m here.”

The response came from surprisingly close by. Turning around with a start, there was Ran, crouching down on the sand. She wore a hooded cape, with a large bow and a quiver of arrows slung over her back.

“Take a look at this.” Looking at the spot she pointed to when she had spoken, there were several small tracks in the sand. It looked like the trail of a many-legged creature, much like a centipede, having crawled by.

“What’re those?” I asked.

“The footsteps of the Suiju that infected you, Hokage-san,” Ran said, standing up. “I had wanted to finish it here, but it may have noticed that something was going on, because it ran away.”

“If it ran away, then have I been set free from the Suiju?”

“That would be nice, but if we leave it be, it will come back,” Ran was quick to say, snuffing out my happiness.

“If it noticed us, could that be because I left the dream?”

“I think that’s part of it, but don’t worry. Suiju are cautious of Sleepwalkers to begin with. No matter what the reason is, if we chase it down, that will solve the problem.”

Kaede beat her wings impatiently. “Yeah, that’s right! So let’s hurry!”

“Right. Hokage-san, this arena is a scene created in your head. This is a good opportunity for a lesson, so let’s try erasing that wall.”

“Huh? You mean me?” I asked in confusion. There was a wall, or a giant building rather, that wrapped around the area. The seats for the audience, which were arranged in a mortar-shape, seemed to be made of solid stone, and I couldn’t see myself being able to erase them on demand.

“This is lesson two. Things may look sturdy, but everything in Nightland was made with the power of imagination. If you want to destroy something, you can break anything. You could wipe it out with an eraser, blast it with a bomb, melt it with a beam. Use whatever’s easiest for you to imagine.”

Something easy to imagine... I walked to the edge of the arena and touched the wall, feeling the rough texture of stone on my palm. It should have been warmed by the sun, but there was no warmth at all.

Using my finger, I traced a square on the surface of the wall, which was sheer, with nothing for my hands to hold onto. That carved a thin line into the stone, so I thrust my nails into it and pulled. A block of stone about the size of a brick popped out and fell to the sand.

The moment it did, the rest of the walls around us began to collapse as if they had lost all structural support. The destruction continued unabated, increasing in intensity as it spread like a domino effect. In all of ten seconds, the seats of the audience and the reserved seats fell apart and scattered across the sand.

Before I could cover my face against the onrushing cloud of dust, a powerful wind blew from behind me. When I looked back, Kaede was flapping her big wings, creating a wind to keep the sand and dust away.

The falling blocks of stone were sucked into the sand, and in no time, there was nothing but desert as far as the eye could see.

“What do you think?” I asked, feeling satisfied. Hitsuji cocked her head to the side.

“It was kind of plain,” she replied.

“Whaa?”

“I think you could have done something way showier.”

“It’s not all about making it showy, you know. For her first attempt, I think she

did quite well.” Midori tried to reassure me, but I was so shocked I missed my chance to thank her.

“It doesn’t need to be flashy at all, but if you make a conscious attempt to broaden the range of your imagination, it will give you greater freedom in your sleep. When your dreams are poor, that’s a warning sign, so keep that in the back of your mind.”

I nodded, despite not really getting it yet.

“Anyway, we’ve got a better view now. We can chase the Suiju.”

When I looked in the direction Ran pointed, the footprints extended beyond the place where the Colosseum stood, continuing far into the distance over the sand.

“Well, shall we be off, then? Let’s try calling out vehicles this time. Hokage-san, please give it a try.”

“Call one out...? What do I do now?”

“This is lesson three. In dreams, you can make anything. Weapons, tools, vehicles... Anything within the realm of your imagination. It’s the same technique as before.”

“It’s hard to make complicated stuff, but if you don’t focus on the details, you’d be surprised what you can pull off,” Kaede added.

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm, so... Let’s say you wanted to pull out a gun, okay? But the way guns work is actually pretty complicated, isn’t it? Can you picture it in your head?”

“No way.”

“Didn’t think so. If you get caught up on that, you’re stuck. But if you just have this fuzzy image that bullets come out of a gun when you pull the trigger, making one’s a cinch.”

“I see...?”

I thought for a little bit, trying to come up with a means of transportation. Cars... Planes... Sleds... Grasping at just one of the many vague images that

passed through my head before fading away, I tried to fill in more of the details.

When I heard heavy stamping on the sand, I looked up. There were five horses standing there.

“...They came,” I said, relieved.

“We’re in a desert, and you didn’t go with camels?” Kaede said, sounding amused.

“Oh! Yeah... That didn’t occur to me. Should I do it over?”

“No, this is good. They’re lovely.” It seemed I had managed to satisfy Hitsuji this time.

“But won’t it be hard to run on sand with their hooves?”

“You can just change the ground.”

Having said that, Hitsuji took off the laurels she was wearing on her head and threw them. Grass grew out of the sand where they landed. In no time, the carpet of green spread out, covering the sand. The Suiju’s footsteps were replaced by flowers of myriad colors.

“There, we’re good. Let’s go!”

We straddled our horses; Kaede undid her transformation, coming down from on top of the ambulance in human form. I had no riding experience, and these were horses without saddles or stirrups, but this was a dream, so I was able to ride without issue. But there was just one problem...

“Hold on? Whaa? Isn’t there something wrong here?”

“Heehee! This is so weird.”

Everyone started laughing. When we rode on the horses I made, for some reason everyone ended up facing backwards. In other words, we were facing the opposite of the direction we were going, and towards the horse’s tail.

“Saya, you’ve got one twisted sense of humor!” Hitsuji said happily, slapping her horse on the butt. The horse ran even faster, and everyone started cheering. The excitement got me smiling, too.

The clear skies had at some point changed to the deeper blues of night. The

area around us was still bright, though, and we had no trouble seeing.

A big moon rose over the horizon. It was so big and beautiful, the kind of moon it was only possible to see in a dream. Beneath the moon it felt like we could reach out and touch, we rode our horses backwards, laughing boisterously as we raced onward.

Minutes, or days, or months went by, and then finally we saw something moving ahead of us. That thing, which looked like it was made with driftwood bound together by metal wire, moved its many legs with irregular motions, trying to flee from us. Its every step produced a bud, which swelled and blossomed into a flower.

“That’s the Suiju that’s infected me?!”

“Looks like it,” Hitsuji said.

“Isn’t it kind of big?”

As we closed in, the Suiju got bigger and bigger. It was a massive construct as big as the school building, creaking as it dashed across the grass. When our horses finally caught up and were running alongside it, its size seemed ready to overwhelm us.

“Saya! Don’t be scared!” Hitsuji shouted, louder than the sound of beating hooves. “The more afraid you are, the stronger the Suiju gets!”

“R-Right...” I said, but it didn’t change the fact it was scary. “How are we supposed to beat this thing...? Whoa?!”

The Suiju swung all of the legs on one side in unison, mowing down anything in range. It dug up the ground, making our horses fall one after another.

I felt my body, thrown into the air, get seized by something. Looking up, Kaede, who had returned to the form of a human-faced bird monster, had seized me in her talons.

She beat her wings hard, getting us far from the ground. Over top of the Suiju’s back, Kaede opened her talons.

I landed on its hairy back—it was like a big, long-haired dog. My feet sunk in up to the ankles. Unlike the mechanical impression I had when viewing it from

below, I was surprised how much like a living creature it was here.

Next to me, Kaede landed and folded her wings.

“Th-Thanks,” I stammered.

“No biggie.”

“What about the others...?”

While I looked around, Midori followed us in jumping onto the Suiju’s back.
“Good job, Kaede-san.”

“I know, right?” Kaede said with a bird-like cackle as Hitsuji floated lightly up behind her.

“Oh! Saya. You’re okay.”

“And what were you planning to do if I wasn’t, Hitsuji? You didn’t save me.”

“You’re not one to go out like that, Saya. I can tell.”

When she said it like that, she was right. If I had Hitsuji with me, I could do anything. Like... fly through the sky, for instance.

The moment that thought occurred to me, my feet floated up into the air without warning.

“Wah!” I cried out in surprise, losing control and flipping upside down. The Suiju’s back was above my head, and the sky spread out beneath my feet. The next moment, I began to fall. I watched Hitsuji and the others looking up at me as I got farther and farther away. When I screamed in terror with the thought that the endless blue void was going to swallow me, someone grabbed my collar, and I suddenly stopped falling.

“You have potential, Hokage-san.”

Turning my head to look behind me, it was Ran who had caught me.

“Lesson four was going to be how to fly, but did you figure it out already?”

“I-I don’t know. I was floating before I knew what happened.”

“Flying in a dream is simple. The trick is to not think of it as being anything special. Treat it as if it’s as normal as walking or talking, and it’s perfectly

natural you would be able to do it.”

“I was sure I was going to need wings, like Tokishima-san.”

“If it makes it feel right to you, you can slap on wings or anything else you need. But even without them, if you want to fly, you can fly. If you panic and lose control like just now, you’ll end up doing things you didn’t intend, so you should get used to it as soon as you can.”

In no time, my feet were pointed back towards the ground once more. Hitsuji and the others were floating upwards, coming closer to me and Ran.

Ran waited for the five of us to be together before speaking. “Okay... Now then, let’s get on with hunting that Suiju.”

Ran drew an arrow from her quiver, nocking it to her bow. When she pulled back the string and released it with sharp movements, the arrow flew straight, burying itself in the Suiju’s back.

The Suiju howled. It sounded like an electronic musical instrument, but it was probably a howl. As if on cue, Kaede tucked in her wings and went into a rapid dive. With the momentum of her descent, four legs with talons stabbed into the Suiju’s back, ripping and tearing. Fur flew, and bits that it was hard to tell if they were legs or part of its frame were sent flying all over, too.

When Hitsuji punched her fists together, they made a clunky metallic sound. At some point, she’d put golden gauntlets on those hands.

“I’m going on ahead, Saya!” Hitsuji declared, then flew at the Suiju. When she landed on its back, she started punching it ridiculously fast. I was shocked by the gap between this and how she was in Dayland. Was Hitsuji always so intense...?

Figuring it was Midori’s turn next, I looked to her, but she spoke up. “Go ahead, Hokage-san. I’m a Bedmaker, so I generally stand by to provide backup.”

Now that she mentioned it, I seemed to recall them saying something like that.

Next, Ran pointed her bow upwards, firing not at the Suiju, but far ahead in the direction it was going. Then she turned to me.

“This is lesson five, Hokage-san. Please, use all your imagination, holding nothing back, and smash it up good.”

Smash... Smash...?

I tried to turn my imagination in a direction I wasn't used to. To something... offensive... with destructive power.

What came out could only be described as being something like warped sea urchins, or maybe spiny pieces of konpeito.

“What is that?” Midori asked, but I didn't know what to tell her.

“I wonder...”

While I looked on in bewilderment, the sugar candies fell towards the Suiju. I watched to see what would happen, and the sugar candies all exploded at once, which shocked me. It blew a number of legs off the Suiju, causing it to majorly lose its balance.

Hitsuji thrust her fist into the air, shouting in protest.

“Watch it!”

“Sorry!”

It had looked like I'd done some good damage, but the Suiju didn't stop walking. Its body was half broken, and its parts scattered all over, but it doggedly charged onward and onward.

Then, suddenly, there was a large shadow.

Looking up, I spotted something huge, long, and thin falling down from the sky. When it stabbed into the ground, causing tremors, it became clear that it was a spiral stone tower. The Suiju, with no time to change course, collided with the sudden spire.

The spire broke off at the base, causing massive quantities of stone to rain down from above. The Suiju's legs were smashed, one after another, and its body was beaten into the sand.

At the same time as the other three, I hurriedly jumped backwards. The falling rocks were burying the Suiju alive.

Finally, the collapse ended, and it was quiet. Ran landed atop the mountain of stone building materials that had crushed the Suiju.

“Phew. Is everyone all right?”

Flying closer, I set down on the stone mountain, too.

“Wow... That tower, it was the arrow you fired off before, wasn't it, Aizome-senpai?”

“I tried imitating what you were doing, Hokage-san.”

Kaede swooped down from above. “Hey, that's plagiarism.”

“Oh, what's the harm?”

“Weren't you just saying it's not good let your imagination become poor, Leader?”

Midori and Hitsuji landed, bringing the five of them back together.

“Hitsuji, does this mean we were able to take out the one possessing me?”

“Nuh-uh. The Suiju has something like a core inside it. We have to break that first.”

“A core?”

“Watch.”

Hitsuji lifted her leg up, then slammed it down on the mountain of stone. The stones broke into little pieces, revealing the Suiju trapped beneath them. It tried to lift its body, but Hitsuji's hand stabbed into it with incredible force.

Her hand sunk in as far as the elbow, and when she pulled back out, she was gripping a pale blue, egg-like thing.

The Suiju's body crumbled. The surface became more and more like sand, until it became indistinguishable from the ground.

Hitsuji tightened her fist. In her little hand, the Suiju's core crumbled with a dry sound.

At the same time, a low sound like a bell ringing began to echo from nowhere in particular.

What is this!?—I tried to yell, but my voice was extinguished by the growing noise. Finally, the air itself began to vibrate, and the surface of the sand began to dance, as if it were boiling.

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They awoke to the sound of a loud alarm.

Saya and the other four surrounding her began to stir. Hitsuji had turned 180 degrees from when they went to sleep, and her right leg now rested on top of Saya's chest.

Was this why she had felt so uncomfortable in her sleep? When Saya grabbed that leg by the ankle and started trying to move it off from on top of her, Hitsuji groaned in protest.

"Stooooop iiiit."

"That's my line!"

The rest of the members seemed to have tossed and turned in their sleep, too. Not only had Ran ended up twisted around, she had started to slip out of the bed.

Midori crawled across the bed and stopped the alarm. She should have been the closest to it when they went to sleep, but somehow moving around in her sleep had ended up putting her on the opposite side of the bed.

"Nnnnngh, that was a good sleep!" Kaede stretched before getting up and out of bed in an instant. Snapping her neck back and forth, she headed for the toilet.

Saya was the next one to crawl to the edge of the bed, then lower her feet off it. The floor was cool beneath her. When she stood up, she staggered— for a moment, her vision went dark.

"...Whoa."

“Are you okay? You must be exhausted,” Midori said as she retrieved her glasses from the side table.

“I don’t know if I’m exhausted, but... I had a bit of a dizzy spell.”

“It’s low blood sugar. Your brain was working really hard, so your body is short on sugars. I’ll put on coffee, so try eating something sweet and resting a little.”

Not long after the fragrance of coffee began to drift through the warehouse, Hitsuji and Ran—who had been slow to rise—finally got up, too. The five of them, with their clothes slightly ruffled, settled down on the sofa again.

Dark coffee was served together with chocolates. Saya wasn’t used to drinking her coffee black, and had been abstaining from drinks with caffeine, but when she experienced the taste of chocolate being melted in her mouth along with hot coffee, she felt like she could feel the sugars soaking into her brain.

“Now you’re a Sleepwalker, too, Hokage-san,” Ran said.

“I don’t think I ever said I’d keep doing this with you.”

“I thought it went without saying. How do you feel, now that you’re awake?”

Saya was silent. She felt good. She had woken up incredibly refreshed, in a way she hadn’t experienced in half a year. No... this might well be the most pleasant awakening she’d had in her entire life. After just three hours of sleep, her head felt as clear as if she’d gotten a full eight.

“I do seem to recall that I promised you restful sleep.”

“...I remember that. Thank you.”

“No, no, it’s fine.”

“But still, we defeated the Suiju that had infected me, right? I don’t have to do anything then...”

“We don’t intend to force you to, of course. I think you should be able to sleep normally from here on. Even alone.” Ran smiled, as if she saw right through Saya. “But I don’t think you’ll be able to find sleep as pleasant as today’s unless you Sleepwalk with us.”

“...”

“I think we’re fortunate to have met, so I’d like to keep working together. Take your time and think it over.”

When Saya found herself at a loss for words, Kaede spoke up. “Wow, though... I didn’t know Hitsujicchi and Sayacchi were like that.”

Midori nodded, too. “I know. I was a little surprised.”

“Huh?”

“No, not, ‘Huh?’ You two were totally lovers. I didn’t get that vibe from you at all before we went to sleep.”

In that instant, Saya had a sudden flashback to her conversation with Hitsuji while they were asleep.

“Ah... Ahhhh?!” Saya let out a weird shout and jumped to her feet, turning to look at Hitsuji despite herself. Hitsuji looked back at Saya in silence, slowly sipping her coffee as they stared into each other’s eyes.

“N-No. It’s not like that,” Saya stammered.

“What’s not like that, Sayacchi?” Kaede pressed.

“That’s was a dream! It’s only in the dream!”

“Whaa? But you were kissing her.”

“I did n—... Okay, I did, but it was on the forehead! That doesn’t count!”

“It doesn’t count if it’s in a dream? Isn’t that kind of awful?”

Midori’s tone was clearly one of bemusement, but Saya didn’t have the presence of mind to call her on it. Ran was just listening with a grin, and Hitsuji wasn’t stepping in to cover for her, either. In fact, she acted like Saya’s reaction had made her angry, and she turned her head to look away.

“Augh! Fine, whatever! I’m going home now!” Saya stood up, snatching her bag.

“Come back when you feel like it,” said Midori.

“She’ll be back... We all know it,” Hitsuji said with a yawn.

Saya left the bedroom, annoyed at them talking like they knew her, and strode towards the exit to the warehouse with quick strides.

8

Saya could definitely sleep now.

Ever since they defeated the Suiju, sleep had returned to her nights once more. Her extensive struggles with it before seemed like a lie, and now she could easily get to sleep, be it at home, or at school; any time she felt sleepy.

In fact, she was almost *too* able to fall sleep.

Maybe it was the habit she had picked up in the last half year of trying to ride any wave of drowsiness that might come her way, but even staring off into space for a little bit during class could easily knock her right out. Still, that was way preferable to being stuck awake with a brain perpetually full of fog.

It took about a week for her body to readjust to sleep. It didn't seem like she'd have an easy time catching up on all the subjects she was behind in, but when she spoke to the school doctor, she said she'd come with her to discuss things with her homeroom teacher. With catch-up lessons arranged and a study plan set up, she was finally able to face her family again.

"Hey, you're looking a lot better," her big sister Aya said after scrutinizing Saya as she was about to leave the house one morning.

"Really?"

"The bags under your eyes aren't as dark as before."

"Yeah, but they won't go away entirely..."

"I kind of like them, you know. They look unhealthy."

"They *are* unhealthy! That's a fact!"

With a chuckle at Saya getting upset, her big sister retreated to the living room.

During her time as an insomniac, she'd felt like she was under assault from all directions, both at school and at home. But when she looked back at it with a clear head, that wasn't really the case at all. If she could just sleep properly, life

had a way of working itself out. That was the lesson Saya had learned after half a year in hell.

However, with each day that passed, Saya felt a sort of tension building inside her. A thirst, you might even say. She hadn't understood the sensation at first, but when she realized it was a dissatisfaction with just sleeping ordinarily, Saya was shocked.

Compared to sleeping alone, the times she had slept side-by-side with Hitsuji Konparu had been deeper, most restful, and more pleasant. She couldn't forget those three hours that the five of them had all slept together at that dodgy bed and bedding store.

She wanted to sleep alongside those girls again. She wanted to Sleepwalk.

When she became aware of that thirst, Saya's feet took her to the Sakaimori Bed & Bedding on their own. It had been exactly two weeks since her last visit.

"Welcome. I trusted you'd come again." When Saya knocked on the door, it was Ran who greeted her as if she'd been lying in wait. "How have you been?"

"Great, but... Somehow, it feels like I'm not sleeping enough."

Ran nodded repeatedly. "I'll bet. I can't say I blame you."

"Huh...?"

"Let's talk inside. Everyone's here."

After passing by the rows of bedding and through the tall shelves, Saya set foot in the Sleepwalkers' bedroom once more.

"Oh! Sayacchi!" Kaede noticed her quickly and waved to her with a grin. Midori and Hitsuji both turned to look at Saya, too, but neither of them looked surprised in the slightest. She took a seat at Ran's suggestion. "You managed to hold off for a long time," Midori said. "I guess you really are a Neversleeper, Hokage-san. You might have higher resistance than the rest of us."

"What do you mean?"

"Once you've been on one Sleepwalk, you pick up the habit, because it feels so much better than just regular sleep."

“Huh...” Looking at each of the other four’s faces, it seemed this wasn’t just them pulling her leg. “H-Hold on. You mean, this Sleepwalking stuff... It’s addictive?”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is,” Ran said nonchalantly.

“What have you done to me?!” Saya got up and shouted despite herself. “Were you all tricking me? Trying to get me hooked on Sleepwalking?! I can’t believe this, it’s like you’re all—”

“It was inevitable.” Hitsuji’s words made Saya go silent for a moment.

“...What do you mean, inevitable?”

“It happens to everyone. Everyone who sleeps side-by-side with me.”

“Everyone...”

Saya looked around the table to the other members once more. Ran, Kaede, Midori... Each of them nodded when her eyes met theirs.

“But, listen. Saya, we weren’t trying to trick you. I mean, you were the one who crawled into bed with me in the first place.”

“Huh? Uh, no, Konparu-san. When I was trying to sleep, you came to me on your—”

“You kissed me while I was sleeping, didn’t you, Saya?”

“That has nothing to do with this, right?!”

With an exasperated sigh, Hitsuji extended her hand towards Saya.

“...What?”

“Enough talk. The truth is, you wanted to rest in peace, right? And you still want to, right?”

“That’s...”

“It’s fine. Come here.” With that said, Hitsuji closed her eyes, and went limp.

With a pounding in her head, Saya’s vision shook.

“Ah, ah.”

The sound grew distant. Her vision darkened. Before she knew it, she’d taken

Hitsuji's hand. By the time she fell to the sofa, as if being sucked into it, Saya had already lost consciousness.

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Riding on the swaying back of an elephant, it felt hard to remember how long we'd been doing this for. The elephant walked through a vast rice paddy, stepping on the coins and flowers that women threw in front of us as it strode along.

"It was horrible of you to trick me like that."

I criticized her, but Hitsuji, who was cradling my head in her lap, giggled without the slightest sign of remorse.

"I never tricked you, my darling."

"But you never told me, either."

"You never asked."

Hitsuji took a grape from the fruit bowl, putting it in my mouth as I kept trying to protest. The smooth, wet sensation passed between my lips, vanishing down my throat.

"There's no taste."

"Oh, my. What a shame."

Having left the porcelain palace, our procession headed into the jungle. Tonight, we hunted a tiger. Vassals carrying tiger-shooting guns led the way, riding buffalo with ebony neck armor. In the distance, the sun dyed the snowy mountains red as it set, and in its place, torches lit up the shining gold coins on the road.

The lackadaisical trip brought on a wave of drowsiness. When I started drifting off, *Crack*, I was struck on the cheek.

When I looked, it seemed Ran and Midori had brought another elephant they

were riding up alongside ours. Ran had hit me with the tip of a riding crop she was carrying.

“Ow. What was that for?”

“You can’t sleep, Hokage-san.”

“Why not?”

“If you go to sleep while Sleepwalking, you’ll be swallowed up by Nightland.”

“Swallowed up?”

“They say that Sleepwalkers who go to sleep in Nightland can never return to Dayland. So, please, be careful not to,” Midori said nonchalantly, despite it being a frightening prospect.

“Pull yourself together, would you? Today’s tiger is a tough one.”

I could already tell that when Ran said tiger, she meant was a Suiju. Ran was carrying a long gun with three barrels, and I had the same kind of weapon in my hands, too. Ran and I wore loose and comfortable men’s clothing, while Midori and Hitsuji were dressed in thin clothes and a veil—the outfit of a dancing girl.

“Where’s Kaede?” I asked.

“Right heeeere.”

Turning in the direction of the voice, I saw a blue-skinned goddess statue with crescent blades in each of her six hands. She walked up from the rear of the procession with earth-shaking steps.

“You look tough,” I pointed out.

“I know, right?”

When we stepped into the jungle, from the darkness beyond where our torchlight could reach, a Suiju that was much like the stars of the night sky tied together with silver thread to form a spiderweb appeared. It looked nothing like a tiger, but there was something bewitching and animal-like about the way it moved.

Kaede charged forward, having become a bloodthirsty goddess, and collided with the Suiju. Next, the guns all fired in unison, illuminating the forest with a

flash of red.

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“...You can’t just dodge the issue!”

No sooner than she had woken on the sofa, Saya started shouting. Hitsuji pushed her away with a look of exasperation.

“This, after I was kind enough to give you some restful sleep.”

“Thanks! Not that I asked!”

Any warm feelings she might have had for Hitsuji vanished from her heart like a fever dream, becoming hard to remember as the fever subsided. She had no love, or anything else, for this woman in her waking moments.

Hitsuji likewise pursed her lips, pouting as she distanced herself from Saya.

Kaede and Midori got up from the Sofa, too. Ran managed to get herself flipped over completely and fell to the floor. The way she’d tossed and turned in her sleep before was apparently not just a one-time thing.

Over coffee and snacks, her consciousness gradually grew sharper. Today’s treats were Bourbon’s Lumonde Cookies and Chocoliere biscuits.

“What are we doing here?” Saya asked while she sipped the dark, bitter liquid.

“What do you mean?” Ran responded.

“I get that we were taking out the Suiju that had infected me last time. But what about this time? Was that one infecting someone, too?”

“Well, Nightland is all connected, so I couldn’t tell you who, but when you think that someone’s been set free from insomnia or nightmares as a result, doesn’t it make you feel a little good?”

“There’s that many Suiju, huh.”

“Incubi, succubi, Bushyasta, the sandman... All around the world, there have always been tales of monsters that cause dreams. Formless beings that infest the dreams of humanity. Sleepwalkers have been fighting them all this time. My family, and Sakaimori-san’s family, too.”

Glaring at Ran who was telling her all of this with a composed face, Saya said, “I’m still seriously shocked you guys tricked me and turned me into an addict here,” Saya said, glaring at Ran as she told her all of this with a composed face

“Every human is a sleep addict. The moment you slept next to Konparu-san, your fate was sealed.”

Thinking quietly about it for a moment, Saya reluctantly opened her mouth. “Well... Fine, I was going to sleep anyway, and it beats not sleeping at all.” Looking from Ran to Midori, Kaede and finally Hitsuji, Saya sighed. “I get it, I’ll work with you... But you’re dragging me into this, so I’m not responsible for whatever happens. Got it?”

9

I woke up inside an airplane. I could hear the roar of the wind as it flew. The lights in the cabin were off. There were many passengers sitting in the seats, sleeping quietly.

The air pressure was doing funny things to my ears. I swallowed.

Beyond the rows of seats in the darkness, one seat had a reading lamp on. I recognized the person sitting there from behind.

It had been so long... So very long. Just the sight of her made it feel like tears might well up.

The moment I opened my mouth to call out to her, a bird took off from inside my mouth.

The familiar figure stood, and began walking to the front of the cabin. Having become a bird, I soared above the other passengers as I gave chase.

She pulled back the curtain and vanished into First Class. I tried to follow, but as a bird, I couldn't possibly pull back the curtain. The pretty, blue curtain was getting shredded by my beak.

That's when a hand reached out from behind to open the curtain for me. Beyond it was a dressing room. There was a large mirror on the wall right in front of me, and no reflection of me in it.

Instantly, I looked down. What had been wings turned into hands with palms. At last, I realized I had been dreaming.

"Are you lucid, Hokage-san?" Ran had appeared in the window in front of me at some point.

"Lucid?"

"I'm asking if you're able to control the dream."

"Well, probably. I only just figured out it's a dream."

Maybe sensing the lack of confidence in my response, Ran furrowed her brow.

“‘Probably’ isn’t good enough. There’s a strong inertia in dreams. If you’re not doing anything, you’ll lose lucidity in no time, and it will be no different from dreaming normally. Ask yourself this, Hokage-san: ‘Who are you?’”

“If you ask me who I am... A Sleepwalker, I guess?”

“And what does one of those do?”

“Hunt Suiju with everyone...”

“Can you tell me who ‘everyone’ is?”

The questions just keep on coming, I thought, but I answered anyway.

“Aizome-senpai, Tokishima-san, Sakaimori-san, and Hitsuji.”

Ran nodded in satisfaction. “Looks like you’re good. Proper nouns are surprisingly hard to stay lucid for. You might accidentally use a completely different name, and not even notice anything was wrong. Remember the sense of lucidity you have now. If something seems weird, try to return to it.”

I still didn’t feel confident, to be perfectly honest, but I nodded. Ran turned around, walking off inside the mirror.

“We’re going to meet up with the others. Come along.”

Following Ran, I stepped over the edge of the mirror. When I passed through the frame and kept going, a maze of dressing rooms with mirrors in all four directions appeared. We were the only things not reflected in the mirrors.

Then, inside the endless rows of changing rooms, something big went by.

“Senpai, just now, was that...?”

“That was a Suiju all right. Let’s go after it.”

“Huh? We’re going after it? Shouldn’t we meet up with the others before—”
“It would be a pain if we lost it. It’s all right—we can handle it, even with just the two of us.”

Chasing after the shadow that swam from mirror to mirror, we pushed onward. In the dressing rooms we passed through, there were discarded

clothes and hangers left behind, giving the impression someone had been there until moments ago.

Eventually, the dressing rooms cut off and we came out into a wide open space. It was a hall lined with Greek-style columns, and there was no ceiling. The Suiju we had been chasing was floating in the bright night sky. Paddling through the heavens with its many oars, the Suiju, which resembled a galley, had parts that would have been the bow of the ship that were glass bottles of varying sizes that grew out of it irregularly. When light from some unknown source struck the bottles, they cast a pale blue light.

“Prepare a weapon, Hokage-san.” Ran pulled a large bow from her shoulder; it was a powerful looking bow, with wheels on each end of it and several thick bowstrings.

“A weapon...?”

“You did it before, didn’t you? Convince yourself you have the strongest weapon you can think of.”

“Last time, all I was able to pull out was this weird sea urchin thing.”

“You’ll just have to cultivate your imagination.”

Looking at Ran again, I was sure she’d been in her school uniform a moment up until a moment ago, but at some point she’d changed into the sort of gaudy armor you might see in a fantasy RPG.

“I see you’re used to this, Senpai.”

“I’ve always been a gamer, so I’m good at this sort of thing. Hokage-san, it’s easier if you imagine a weapon from something you’re familiar with.”

Ran pulled a long arrow from the quiver at her waist. The brilliant, peacock-like green and blue of the fletching sparkled in the light cast by the Suiju. Nocking the arrow and pulling it back as far as she could, she fired. The arrow sailed through the air, leaving the cracking sound of the bowstrings behind, and it shattered several of the Suiju’s glass bottles. The sound echoed like a roar, and the Suiju’s body tilted. There were slits on its body, parallel with the oars, and countless lenses popped out of them, turning to focus on us.

“Is it looking at us?”

“It is looking at us, yes.”

I thought I saw the lenses flash, and in the next moment, thin rays of light burned the ground at our feet. We hurriedly jumped back, but the rays of light followed. One of them grazed my arm.

“Hot!”

“Are you all right?”

“Absolutely! Put some of Surugafuki’s okusa on it, and it’ll be fine by morning,” I responded calmly. I knew how to handle this— I’d read today’s feature article in Gekkan Koko Megumi SP, after all. “Senpai, I’ll put some okusa on you, too, so stay still. I’ve always got some on me. Look.”

When I pulled out my personal tube of okusa, removed the cap, and squeezed some out onto my finger, Ran spoke up. “Oh, this is no good—Midori! If you would!”

“J-Just a second!” No sooner did I hear the voice from the dressing rooms behind us when a winded Midori came running out.

“Oh, Sakaimori-san. Let’s put okusa—” I started to say, but Midori reached out and flicked me in the forehead with her finger.

“There!”

“Ow?!” I cried out in pain. That was a serious flick.

“Look at your own hands,” Midori told me. “Please, become lucid. Can you tell me your name?”

“Ho-Hokage... Hokage... Uh, what was it...?”

Midori and Ran looked at one another.

“I’ll wake her,” Midori said, placing a hand over my mouth.

While watching Hitsuji on horseback and Kaede, who had turned into a lion from the waist down, come out of the dressing rooms, my consciousness went dark, and— **Z**
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When she woke up in the bed, Midori was leaning over Saya to check on her. When Saya cried out in surprise, Midori covered her mouth with a hand.

“Shhhh! You’ll wake everyone else. Calm down, we’re back in Dayland now.”

When she saw Saya had calmed, Midori removed her hand.

“...Sorry, I was saying weird stuff, wasn’t I?”

“You don’t have to worry about it. It was just sleep-talk. Suiju attacks strip our lucidity away.”

There was still a lingering confusion. The sense that a similar but different language had overwritten Japanese in her head was gradually fading.

“Do you want to try resting a bit longer? You can join back in later if you want.”

“Nah, I’m good. I’ll go. Sorry.”

Saya and Midori went back to lying in their original positions on the bed. They were right next to Hitsuji, on opposite sides. Hitsuji was sleeping on her back, breathing softly, and giving off such dense waves of drowsiness that they almost seemed visible to the eye. The Blanket—Hitsuji’s power which could put any person to sleep, steadily wrapped around Saya and Midori.

“Could you not tell Hitsuji about what just happened?” Saya said as she felt her consciousness becoming more indistinct.

“Why not?”

“Uh, I mean... If she knew I got hit by a Suiju and started talking nonsense... It’d be embarrassing...”

“You worry about that sort of thing more than I would have expected, Hokage-san.”

“More than you expected? What do you—”

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The Suiju's body laid on its side in a hall with several collapsed columns. Its keel was cruelly broken, and countless oars were scattered across the cobblestones. The glass bottles of the bow were shattered, not one remaining intact.

"That was fast. They already took care of things here, huh."

Looking up when Midori spoke, I realized that Hitsuji and the other two were standing atop the remains of the Suiju. It seemed they had noticed we were back, too. Hitsuji stretched and then waved to us.

"So, about what I was saying... Right before we went to sleep..."

"I won't say a word. But be careful—if there's something you're dwelling on during a Sleepwalk, it can cause you to lose control of the dream. It's a weakness the Suiju can attack, so you might want to say it yourself before she finds out."

"Gotcha. I'll bear that in mind."

Following Midori, I walked over to where the other three were.

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Saya spent her days frequenting Sakaimori Bed & Bedding's warehouse, going on Sleepwalk after Sleepwalk. Most of their meetings were on Wednesdays and Fridays after school, or on Sundays, the times it was easiest to make their schedules agree.

With the amount of time they operated growing longer, it had become difficult to get home before evening, so she explained to her family that she had started a club at school with some friends.

She agonized over what club it was, but eventually settled on something incredibly close to the reality: the Napping Club. It was a group of girls who were light sleepers, or prone to nightmares, so who had gathered so that they might pursue quality sleep together. This explanation of Saya's, in light of her

impressive past achievements in insomnia, was believed more easily than she'd expected. Thus, the stage was set for her to Sleepwalk even on weekdays.

However, Saya's Sleepwalking didn't improve that easily. The first difficulty was maintaining lucidity, and no matter what she did, she lost control right after entering Nightland.

Saya protested that this wasn't anything like their initial suggestion that she was a Neversleeper, and unaffected by dreams, but her companions were just as confused.

"This isn't how you said it'd be, Aizome-senpai!"

"It's strange, huh... Maybe you simply have no natural talent?"

"Isn't that a bit harsh after you dragged me into this?!"

While Saya and Ran were bickering, Hitsuji interjected. "It's okay, Ran. I'll look after her."

"Huh?"

Hitsuji looked up at Saya from the sofa and continued. "If you get lost in Nightland, Saya, I'll definitely come for you. So don't worry."

"S-Sure... Got it."

Overwhelmed, Saya nodded. With the sense that that had resolved the issue, their travels through Nightland could continue.

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When I came out of the ticket gate, I saw a path up the steep slope of mountain continuing upwards, off into the distance. Perhaps there were hot springs nearby, because a thick steam covered the area. There were only serious climbers with proper equipment around, and they passed me by as I stood still, climbing one after another.

I wondered why, unlike them, I had come in such normal clothes. The incline

was too steep, and the stairs that I could see in places were practically walls.

The number of people coming out of the gate rose and the mountain path grew crowded. Pushed along by the crowd, I began climbing the mountain, as I had no other choice.

I advanced on all fours for a while. When I looked down by chance, the station I had left before was now way down below. My arms and legs froze up. This was scary. I couldn't go another step.

Ignoring me as I clung to the wall, the climbers passed me one after another. While I remained unable to ascend or descend due to the fear, a ladder was erected beside me, and Hitsuji climbed up.

"Hey there, Hitsuji."

"Saya, you're always afraid, aren't you?"

"Heheh, that's not true at all."

"There's no need to put up a strong front, my beloved. I do love that part of you, though."

"I'm no match for you, am I, Hitsuji?"

"Look over there. There's a Suiju nest on the mountain. If you just keep climbing like a straightforward idiot, you'll be playing right into its hands. Let's go together from here. I'll put up a ladder for you."

Looking where she pointed, I saw a structure that looked like a bird's nest with iron scaffolding wrapped around it. There was a Suiju that looked like a mix between a train and a three-headed bald eagle inside it, and it was gobbling up the climbers one after another as they arrived.

"That's it, huh? Okay!" Having gotten worked up by having Hitsuji next to me, I floated into the air with ease.

"Saya, just a moment?"

"Don't worry, leave this to me. I'll smash it all up."

I tried to imagine the strongest weapon I could. A gun... A cannon... A bomb... Oh, yeah, a nuclear bomb! If I dropped a nuclear missile on the summit, the

Suiju was bound to be obliterated instantly. Why did no one else ever think of this?

I envisioned it. The nuke going off, and the Suiju's nest being vaporized.

Just as I had imagined, there was a bright flash above us. A ball of toxic red and yellow flames was born, expanded, swallowed up the summit, and trimmed years off our lives with the Crispy Clark-kun effect.

The banks failed one after another.

Fish vanished from the marketplace.

While watching the explosion grow larger and larger on TV in a child's room, we were stricken with uncertainty.

"What's going to happen from now on?" While I cried uncontrollably, Hitsuji scrutinized me for a moment, then reached out and bopped me on the back of the head.

"Ouch."

"Okaaaay, come back to lucidity now, please."

"Huh?"

Having whacked me back into lucidity, Hitsuji elaborated. "Just being powerful isn't everything, Saya. Try to create something beyond your ability to imagine and you'll lose control in no time. That's why each of us fights in a way that's easy for us to understand, right?"

Now that she mentioned it, Ran used an RPG-style sword and bow, while Hitsuji fought with her gauntleted fists. Kaede was good at transformation, so she used animal fangs and claws.

"What about Midori?"

"That girl isn't good at imagining fighting at all. That's why she supports us as a Bedmaker."

"I don't think I'm all that good at it, either, you know. I had a big gun during the tiger hunt, but that felt like I was just using something that had already shown up in the dream."

“You brought out that sea urchin bomb thing, didn’t you? You have some aggression in you, Saya. Now it’s just a matter of giving it a form that’s easy to use. It’d be easiest to build a template, then adapt it when you want to use it, I guess.”

“Right...”

While I was mumbling, the walls of the child’s room got blasted away, and the Suiju stuck its three heads in.

“Wahh!”

Hitsuji reacted by punching the thing. One of the heads flew away, and two more grew in its place. Now with four heads trying to force their way inside, we were pushed back against the wall.

“Come on, Saya! Can’t you think of anything familiar to you that you could probably use in a fight?”

“O-Okay, then...”

Something easy to imagine... Something I was familiar with... From my daily life, that I could use in a fight... Driven into a corner, my imagination finally forced itself to come up with a weapon. In the next instant, I had a can of bug spray in one hand and a BBQ lighter in the other. When I lit up the lighter and sprayed the bug spray, the line of flames grew longer and longer, enveloping the Suiju’s whole body. The Suiju swung its heads around like crazy as it rolled out of the child’s room. I leaned out through the broken wall to watch the Suiju that had become a fireball roll down the mountain and out of sight.

I was overjoyed to have finally come up with a weapon, and filled with a sense of accomplishment at having taken down the Suiju, so I turned my best smile towards Hitsuji.

“Heehee. Well?”

Hitsuji summed up her impression in one phrase:

“So plain!”

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Depending on how the members felt, they would change up the bedding in the bedroom from time to time. The beds in the warehouse each had palettes under them, and Midori would operate the forklift herself to swap them out.

“We can sell the beds we’ve used for a high price,” Ran said as the exchange was completed and they were watching the previous beds be carried off by the forklift.

“Huh...?”

“There’s a marketplace where beds that have been used by Sleepwalkers are sold at a high price.”

“That’s creepy, you know?!”

“Many of the people who were attacked by the Suiju suffer from sleep disorders. They have trouble getting to sleep, or are tormented by nightmares... If the beds and bedding that we Sleepwalkers have used can be even the slightest use to them, don’t you think it’s worth it?”

“...”

“Don’t worry, we’ll make sure they’re properly cleaned before they’re sold.”

“Well... If that’s the case...” Saya said hesitantly. Hitsuji leaned in to peer at her face.

“You’re sure you’re okay with that, Saya?”

“I don’t even know anymore.”

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After utterly failing in the attempt to stuff and preserve my pet dog, only the ambiguous form of the dead body of the animal remained. The eyes of the marbles filling its head, which had collapsed like a manju looked at me accusingly, so I turned to the stuffed animal and tried to explain myself.

I'll get it right next time, I said, faltering, but the stuffed animal tore into me with a harsh tone, saying, *There won't be a next time. This happened because you didn't take it seriously.*

Ahh! What are you going to do about this?! I'm finished because of you! How are you going to take responsibility?!

"Sorry. I thought I could do it. Sorry."

If you want my forgiveness, trade bodies with me. You be the stuffed animal. You be the failed stuffed animal!

The stuffed animal actually chased me down and cornered me against the wall. *I don't want to be a failed stuffed animal!* Even as I thought that, I knew I was the one in the wrong, so I couldn't argue back. When I tried to accept it, crying, the stuffed animal was torn in two vertically, and fur and stuffing scattered everywhere. Hitsuji clapped her gold gauntleted hands, leaning over to peer at my face.

"You okay, Saya?"

"Hitsuji... Fancy meeting you here."

"Why is it you're so strangely bold whenever we meet in Nightland?"

"Because seeing your face makes even the worst troubles go away."

"You're putting on airs, too. Okay, lucidity, lucidity."

When Hitsuji slapped my cheeks, I became lucid.

"Sorry to always trouble you."

"Yay."

Leaving the classroom with the stuffed animal, we began walking down the cold beach by the sea. Beneath cloudy skies, faded grass blew in the chill wind from the sea, as did Hitsuji's airy hair as she walked in front of me.

“Hey, Hitsuji?”

“Whaaaaat?”

“Why did you show up in front of me?”

“I could ask you the same, Saya. You know, I never thought I could like someone this much.”

“Same here. Even though we both know it’s only in our dreams.”

“Ahaha... Yeah, you’re right.” Hitsuji laughed in a low voice.

“Why is it we like each other?” Saya asked. “From the moment we first met in the dream, we were suddenly lovers.”

“It’s because we slept together, don’t you think?”

“You’re making that sound worse than it is.” I laughed despite myself, but Hitsuji went on.

“I mean, lying down in the same bed, our eyes closed, feeling one another’s warmth, our breathing slowly synchronizing... It’s like we’d become one being, don’t you think?”

“Sure, but isn’t it the same with the others? We’re all sleeping together.”

“True. We’re all comrades sharing the same sleep. That’s why we’re all super close.”

I nodded. It might have been hard for anyone who hadn’t Sleepwalked to understand our closeness.

From what I had heard, Ran and Midori were both from families that had inherited the secrets of the Sleepwalkers. Midori and Kaede were otaku friends who had met online. Hitsuji’s abilities as a Blanket were readily apparent, so she was scouted by Ran shortly after starting high school, and they had hung out together since.

The reasons they’d met were all different, but once they all Sleepwalked together, there was no way they could part.

I could digest all of it quite easily now. Like them, I had been turned into a Sleepwalking “addict” and dragged into this, but I don’t think it was just a

hunger for sleep. The closeness between people, the warmth, the desire to touch another... Once a person was able to touch those things with a high degree of purity, they would lose the ability to let them go.

“Still, you and I are special, aren’t we?”

When I spoke, Hitsuji stopped, turned around, and leaned her head against my chest.

“You’re right. I wonder why. I love you, Saya.”

“Me, too. I wish it could be the same in Dayland.”

As I embraced her fluffy head, Hitsuji went silent for a moment, then answered in a quiet voice.

“Yeah. That really would be nice.”

I understood that these warm feelings I felt in sleep would dissipate in Dayland. As soon as we woke, Hitsuji would look away from me, and our bodies that had nestled close would awkwardly part. Even so, in this brief moment, she was unbearably dear to me.

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Over the course of many Sleepwalks, Saya gradually got used to it. It was still common for her to need help from her comrades to become lucid, and the weapons she created were still plain, but she got used to fighting in Nightland. Before she realized it, she was so absorbed in the fight against the Suiju that it felt like she had been doing this forever.

However, she still couldn’t get used to her relationship with Hitsuji. In Nightland, they were close lovers. In Dayland, strangers. No, strangers was a bit much; they were friends, or perhaps comrades was the better word. Still, the emotional gap between when they were asleep and awake was confusingly vast.

10

The seasons changed, entering July. Because they had reached the limits of air conditioning inside of the warehouse, the party had taken up sleeping outside.

One Sunday afternoon, they erected poles on the lawn behind the warehouse, and slept on five hammocks tied together in the shade.

The dream felt refreshingly cool as they raced across a field of ice on dog sleds. They defeated a Suiju that acted like a polar bear or a killer whale, diving beneath the ice before coming back out to attack them. Then Saya overshot, fell into the water, and woke up because of the coldness.

Maybe it was because she was a Neversleeper, but occasionally, Saya would wake up all alone before the others. Moving carefully so as not to flip the hammock, she lowered her feet down to the ground. The other four still hadn't woken up. She put on her shoes to go get a drink of water, and when she looked up, she noticed someone else was there.

It was a man wearing a parka, the hood low over his face. He looked down at Saya from his saddle on the back of a massive goat. His was shadowed and she couldn't see it, but she could tell that he was looking at her.

"...Um?"

When Saya cautiously addressed the man, he spoke. "Beware the sheep's egg, Sleepwalker."

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With a dull shock, Saya woke up. The hammock was swaying above her. It took some time for her to process that what she had just experienced was a dream, and she had woken up when she fell to the ground.

Hitsuji sat up in the hammock next to her and looked down.

“Huh? Saya fell out.”

“Ahaha! Lame! Whoa-oh-oh!” Kaede came crashing down beside Saya, which gave Midori a good chuckle.

“Did you hurt yourself anywhere?” Ran peered down at Saya from above.

“No...” As she stood up, Saya felt the memories coming back to her slowly.

That egg... What was it? she wondered.

Oh, right. She had nearly forgotten, but when they defeated the Suiju that had infected Saya, Hitsuji had pulled an egg-shaped core from its remains.

There was one other thing she remembered—

in all their Sleepwalks up until now, when they defeated a Suiju, Hitsuji always held the core, then crushed it. Her comrades always stood nearby, watching her do it.

That ritualized sequence, carried out just before they would return to Dayland, was remembered by no one.

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The classroom was full of excited ring-tailed lemurs jumping around. They would snatch fruit from the branches of a tree outside the window to gnaw on, leaving the floor buried in hard seeds they had left behind.

In front of several ring-tailed lemurs, as well as four students who were not lemurs, I was speaking from the teacher’s desk again today. However, my voice was lost in the cacophony and didn’t reach them. I felt as though I might be crushed under the weight of the exhaustion and sense of futility, but Hitsuji finally turned to look at me.

“Hey, everyone, Saya-sensei is trying to say something.”

With her focusing their attention, the four of them were finally facing my

way.

“Thanks, Hitsuji-kun.”

“You have a kind of difficult look on your face today, Saya-sensei.”

“There was something I wanted to check.”

I talked to my companions about my suspicions; It wasn’t simple to avoid losing track of the story. In sleep, the slightest lapse of caution would twist my reasoning, and the next thing I knew I’d be talking about something completely different, or maybe uttering nonsense sounds that meant nothing at all. It was, in fact, my third time trying to explain this.

I might add, I knew I had explained this in Dayland a number of times, too. The thing was, we’d forget. Not just them, but me, too. Our consciousness when we were dreaming really was different from when we were awake, so when we woke from Nightland our memories were rather vague. Of all of them, though, the memories of this Egg were the hardest to hold on to.

“I don’t remember at all. Was I really doing something like that?”

“You were. Every time. Everyone was watching.”

Even when I said this, my comrades just looked at one another in bewilderment.

“Well, okay, I get it. If you say so Saya. Let’s all be careful, then.”

“Yes, that makes sense. I’ll keep an eye out from the rear, too.”

We left the classroom, descending the spiral staircase that wrapped around the trunk of the baobab tree. From here, we could see a Suiju that looked like one of the big cats that wander the savannah.

“That’s it, huh,” I said.

Ran raised her voice. “Hold on, everyone—Over there, too.”

Looking at where she was pointing, another Suiju caught my eye.

It was an eight-legged reptilian Suiju, and it was looking up at—
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It was no good.

They hung on until the alarm rang, but both Suiju ended up getting away.

It was their first time experiencing a failed hunt; The five of them surrounded the table groggily, reflecting on the hunt as they replenished their sugars.

“Those guys... they were working together. Never seen that before.” Hitsuji sounded mystified.

Any time they had encountered Suiju before this time, it had always been alone. Each Suiju had a different look and way of moving. They were unlike other creatures humans knew, more like machines than anything, and they acted in ways that defied emotional investment.

Now, not only had two of them appeared at the same time, they had worked together to obstruct the hunt.

“I thought they were like bugs,” Midori whispered. Kaede furrowed her brow and seemed to be thinking, too.

“Maybe they got smarter?”

“I don’t know, but... Let’s be a little cautious next time. Keep close watch, and see if our opponents have changed how they act.”

Saya and the others nodded in response to Ran’s words.

“In the end, we weren’t able to confirm anything about the egg, huh,” Saya said. Everyone looked at her quizzically.

“What egg?”

11

On their next Sleepwalk—a solitary one—they encountered a lone Suiju.

The next time after that, there was also one.

The next time after that, there were two.

Then it returned to one again, then two... They were witnessing irregular behavior from the Suiju one in three times.

At the same time, their Suiju-hunting success rate fell. It grew more common for them to be caught off guard and have to retreat, even when there was only one to deal with.

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I walked down a long hall at the inn. Sensing a boisterous feast at the end of the hall, I felt a need to hurry.

I was late to the party.

There was an endless line of sliding panel doors on the right-hand side of the hall, and a garden on the other side of glass doors on the left. The garden was full of crocodiles, so I had no intention of heading out there.

The end of the hall also had a sliding panel door, and many pairs of slippers were cast off in front of it. I opened the sliding panel door, out of breath. Inside was a tatami mat room with a high ceiling, and there was a line of low dining tables, stretching off so far in the distance I could barely see where they ended.

I pushed a trolley into the room, approaching one of the tables. Kaede was selling doujinshi at it.

“Sorry for making you wait,” I said.

“Nah, it’s all good. Well, you want to get started?”

I sat, kneeling in the formal style, next to Kaede, and we began preparing for today’s direct sales event. The doujinshi Kaede had drawn was laid on the low table. The title was *Animal Sasamishi*. “Sasamishi” apparently meant that, on a five-level scale, it was about a level-four tearjerker.

“Looks promising.”

“I know, right?” Kaede said proudly, and the sales event began.

Soon, Hitsuji, Midori, and Ran came as customers, and us five regulars faced each other across the low dining table. Ran picked up *Animal Sasamishi*. “May I look?”

“You sure can. Go right ahead.”

With Kaede’s permission, Ran opened the book, and all of us looked at it. The whole thing was a manga about Kaede and Midori becoming lovers and flirting with each other.

Midori looked embarrassed. “So this is what you’ve been drawing...” she said.

“Yeah, it kind of is. Sorry. I meant to keep it a secret from everyone, especially Midori, but—Huh?”

Kaede’s perfect smile gradually wavered, confusion spreading across her face.

“Wait. Hold on. No. I didn’t mean to say that—”

“Kaede?”

“No, no, nonononono, it’s a lie! Don’t look, I’ll die!”

Kaede had been in human form on this rare occasion, but her body now swelled up, turning into a pitch black beast. The table, the tatami room, the inn—it was all blown away by her transformation. The flames she spouted from Kaede’s large, split mouth swallowed us up, and—

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“Ahhhhh!” Kaede’s scream snapped all of us back to wakefulness in an instant.

Sitting bolt upright in the bed, Kaede stiffened as the other four looked at her. She was like a deer caught in the headlights.

“I-It’s not like that.” Looking cornered, Kaede shook her head. A slightly bewildered Ran tried talking to her.

“You don’t need to panic... You’re like Konparu-san and Hokage-san, it’s just in the dream—Right?”

“...” Kaede’s inability to immediately respond spoke volumes. Before they could come up with some words to make her feel less awkward, Kaede rolled out of bed, and ran away without even tidying her clothes.

“Ah! Wait!” Midori hurried after her.

It took the four a full hour and a half, working together, to coax a crying Kaede out of the restroom she locked herself in.

“I mean it. I honestly never drew any of that stuff.”

“I know. It’s okay. Don’t cry, all right?”

Sitting next to a sniffing Kaede, Midori spoke to her in soft whispers. Ran, Hitsuji and Saya spoke to her, too, sometimes patting her back or head, all of them nestling close to her.

Eventually, as Kaede calmed herself, Saya hesitantly opened her mouth.

“We aren’t losing control of the dream, are we?” Everyone raised their heads as she said that. “Someone said it to me before, right? Sleepwalkers can fight the Suiju because they can control the dream. But today, we didn’t just fail to find a Suiju, we didn’t even realize we were dreaming.”

Ran thought it over as she responded. “It’s not unusual for one of our members to fail to become lucid, but normally the other members have been able to support them. Even Midori failed, today, right?”

“It was no good. Normally, I’m able to become lucid 100% of the time. That’s why I go in as a Bedmaker to support all of you. When was the last time this

happened...?”

“Konparu-san? Did you notice it was a dream?” Saya asked. Hitsuji furrowed her brow.

“It felt kind of weird...”

“Weird?”

“I mean, looking at the content, that was Kaede’s nightmare, wasn’t it?”

“I-It was... mine, I think.” Kaede nodded, still trembling.

“I figured. In all the time we five have been Sleepwalking together, I don’t think we’ve ever been caught up in someone’s dream before.”

“Normally, if we’re in someone else’s dream, we notice, yeah,” Saya agreed. “When motifs of the dream don’t come from inside you, something feels off about them.”

“But it didn’t feel off this time. What does it mean?”

“Could it have been the same dream?” Saya’s words made Hitsuji’s eyes go wide.

Looking dubious, Ran asked, “What do you mean by the same, Hokage-san?”

“Oh, basically, I was wondering if it was possible that everyone was dreaming the same dream.”

“Everyone...” Ran echoed.

“You know, we should notice when we’re in someone else’s dream, but even the rest of you, who have far more experience than me, didn’t think it was a dream. That means, while it ended as Tokishima-san’s nightmare, we can think of it as one big dream shared by all of us.”

“I’ve been on quite a number of Sleepwalks up to now, but not once has anything like that happened,” Midori hesitantly interjected.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but recently, the Suiju have been acting weird, haven’t they? We didn’t spot the Suiju at all this time, so it might have been doing something against us.”

“So, you’re saying that was a Suiju attack?” Hitsuji cocked her head to the side

at what Saya had been saying. “Is that possible? Those guys never seemed that smart.”

“Not before now, no.”

“We need to check. If something like that were to happen again...”

Ran looked at the clock. “We’ll have to wait for next time to verify. It’s getting late, so let’s break for the day.”

The five left the warehouse, returning home well after the sun had set.

“I don’t feel like I’ll be sleeping today.”

Saya heard Kaede mutter those words as she was leaving. She stopped despite herself, feeling forlorn as she watched Kaede walk away.

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When I woke late at night and went to the toilet, there was light leaking out from the living room. I poked my head in, figuring Dad might be up, but although the TV was on, the room was empty. The screen showed black and white static. I hear this is what those old analog TVs looked like, once upon a time. The curtain swayed in the wind, and I realized the window was open. Looking outside, there was a bear in the garden.

Oh, no! I hurried away from the window, then regretted it. I’d screwed up. I needed to close the window or it would come in.

Like I thought, the snorting of the bear drew closer, and then it came inside the house. My heart pounded as I headed for the stairs. I tip-toed up to the second floor. The bear was stomping around on the second floor as it searched for me. It was only a matter of time before it came up here.

Returning to our room, I shook my little sister Midori awake.

“What’s wrong, Saya-onee-chan?”

“Shh. There’s a bear in the house. We’ve gotta run.”

“Huh? What about Mom and Dad?”

“I dunno. Maybe they got eaten.”

“Nooo, I’m scared.” Midori started weeping, and she buried herself under the covers. I could hear the creaking steps of a bear on the stairs. Midori wasn’t coming out, so I decided I’d have to run for it.

Opening the window and heading outside, I started to walk across the sloped corrugated iron of the roof. Behind me, I sensed the bear enter the room. I was worried about Midori, who I’d left behind. If she stayed under the covers, I figured she’d be all right, but if she couldn’t resist coming out...

I continued across the roof. I wanted to run, but my legs were shaky and had no strength. I jumped down to the ground in front of the entrance, and pumped my legs desperately trying to get away from the house. I climbed the hill road through the dark pine forest with everything I had. I could sense the bear closing in on me from behind. Was that big, black, scary thing really a bear?

Unable to turn around and look, I was forcing my body onward when someone leaned over me from behind.

“Onee-chan, why did you leave me?” the thing with Midori’s voice whispered in my ear.

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Saya awoke drenched in sweat; throwing the towel blanket off of her, she got up. Her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might burst, and it took some time for her to catch her breath.

In the darkness, she could make out the silhouettes of her companions, each lying down on the futon, sleeping in their own ways. They had put down tatami mats in the bedroom, and spread a sea of futons on top of them. The futons had a big mosquito net hung around them, creating a gap between them and the surrounding darkness.

The area was filled with the scent of mosquito coils. The bedside lamp left out on top of the tatami was shaped like a paper lantern. The pale light that filtered through the rice paper created light green waves on the mosquito net as it swayed gently in the wind created by the air conditioner.

She couldn't get the impression left by the dream she'd seen just now out of her head. Unable to become lucid, she'd been toyed with again. Was that her own dream? Or...

Moving her head, she looked toward Midori. Midori was lying with her face turned in the opposite direction. She wasn't moving at all, so Saya got worried and tried to take a look at her face.

When she did, something moved outside the mosquito net.

Walking slowly through the warehouse, she saw something that looked like a composite entity made of window frames cross the light of the lamp. The thing that appeared on the tatami was...

A Suiju.

Was this still Nightland? Saya looked down to her own hands, pulling her finger. In a dream, it would stretch without resistance, but now it didn't budge.

This was definitely Dayland.

In front of Saya's eyes, before her thoughts could catch up, the Suiju slipped inside the mosquito net. It was half transparent, and didn't look like it had a concrete form, but the smoke from the mosquito coils hugged the outline of it.

The Suiju bent its legs, approaching Midori's body as if to sniff her.

That did it. Saya was finally set free from her sleep paralysis.

"Sakaimori-san! Wake up!" She practically jumped towards Midori, shaking her shoulder with a hand.

"Huh?! Wha?! What?!" Midori let out shrill cries as she awakened; at the same time, the Suiju leaning over her dissipated like mist.

Between Saya and Midori's shouting, the other three woke up, too.

"Nnngh? What? What's up?" Hitsuji sat up, rubbing her eyes.

“You’re so noisy. We were just about to—Huh?” Kaede’s voice wavered with confusion. “Uh, don’t tell me I went and did something again...?”

“...It wasn’t you, Tokishima-san. This time...” Ran said in a raspy voice, then cleared her throat. She might have been trying to clear her head, because she squeezed the bridge of her nose before opening her eyes again. “We lost control of the dream again. Worse, the five of us didn’t even manage to gather...”

“That’s not all, Aizome-senpai,” Saya interrupted Ran. “I saw it. A Suiju, in Dayland.”

They didn’t accept what Saya said at first. It was Ran’s interpretation, as their senpai, that there was a clear line between Dayland and Nightland.

“It’s true, when you wake from a long dream, you can be unsure whether you’ve left Nightland or not,” Ran said.

“But they’ve been acting strange lately, haven’t they? The Suiju work together, and we haven’t been able to act with lucidity... If this is a Suiju attack, they may be trying to come out into Dayland.”

“What would their goal be?”

“I couldn’t tell you that.”

“Um... The Suiju you say you saw, Hokage-san, it was leaning over me, right? What do you suppose it was trying to do?” Midori asked, sounding worried.

“Hmm... If they were animals, I might say it was sniffing you, or trying to eat you, but with Suiju it’s hard to even tell what part is the head.”

While Saya was groaning in thought, Kaede, who had remained quiet up until now, hesitantly raised her hand.

“Can I say something? It might have nothing to do with what Sayacchi’s talking about, though.”

“Go ahead?”

When suggested she continue, Kaede spoke up hesitantly. “Sayacchi, you were saying something about an egg before, weren’t you?”

Saya sat up straight in surprise. The mysterious Egg that she knew she had brought up several times, both in Dayland and in Nightland. This was the first time that any member other than Saya had touched on that memory which, for some reason, they all forgot.

“You know how your voice suddenly woke us up, Sayacchi? Well, just before leaving Nightland, I feel like I saw it, too. That Egg.”

“What was it like?”

“I don’t remember exactly how it went, but I feel like it involved Hitsujicchi.”

With everyone’s eyes focusing on Hitsuji, she blinked as if dumbfounded.

“Me?”

“Yeah. You brought your hands together in front of your chest, like this, turning your palms up—and there was this pale blue egg with cream-colored specks sitting on them.”

“A-And?”

Kaede shut her eyes tight as she continued. “Then, what was it...? Did you smash it? Oh, no, the memories fading on me.”

“Did you fight a Suiju? When I saw it, I think it was pulled out of a defeated Suiju, if I remember right.”

“I don’t remember fighting... Though maybe I just forgot it. Anyways, I just remember Hitsujicchi was standing there, holding something, and whatever it was was super important.”

“Konparu-san? Do you have any recollection of this?”

Looking Saya in the eye, Hitsuji slowly shook her head. “I don’t remember. Not a thing.”

“Ever since becoming a Sleepwalker, I thought I was remembering what happened in Nightland properly. It would be kind of creepy otherwise, you know,” Midori said, her expression darkening.

“Then that means it’s not just memories of Nightland, right? Our memories of Dayland have vanished with them,” Hitsuji said.

“If you’re right that you saw a Suiju after waking up, Hokage-san, we can hypothesize that Nightland is exerting some kind of influence on Dayland,” Ran said.

“Influence?”

“You might be able to interpret it as an attack.”

“The Suiju are striking back, you mean?”

“Do all of the missing memories pertain to that Egg?”

“I don’t know. We’re forgetting, so there’s no way to know.”

Seeming to snap back to her senses, Kaede raised her head. “Hey, if memories in Dayland vanish, too, won’t we forget this conversation?”

As the other four looked at each other, Saya watched with a feeling of irritated impatience.

She was right. The fact of the matter was, the doubts and warnings Saya had brought up were forgotten during the next Sleepwalk. Even Saya herself tended to forget. There had been conversations like this in their post-Sleepwalk debriefings before, but it only ever lasted a short time.

“Let’s leave records. We need to get to the bottom of whatever’s going on.”

Everyone nodded in response to Ran’s words.

12

By the time she returned home, it was 9:00pm; even with the Napping Club as an excuse, this was clearly too late. She entered the house and shut the door behind her, prepared to get yelled at.

“I’m home...”

There was no response. The lights in the entrance hall were off, and the light from the living room was spilling out through the half-open door.

She started to take off her shoes, then stopped despite herself.

The dream she’d had before flashed back into her mind. The dark hall, the light from the living room. Where Midori had been her little sister, and though she’d been distracted by the illogical events that could only have happened in a dream, that scene had taken place in her own familiar home, too.

She proceeded down the hall with quiet steps and peeked into the living room. Only the TV was on, a muted news program displayed on screen.

No one was inside the room. Normally, at this time of day, her parents and elder sister should have been around, yet today there was no sign of anyone in the living room or the kitchen.

Going over next to the window, she pulled back the curtains. Unlike in her dream, there wasn’t a wide yard out there, just a wall made of concrete blocks a stone’s throw away, with the parking lot beyond it.

This should be obvious, but there was no bear.

Checking the locks on the windows, she closed the curtain once more. The moment she turned around, she saw someone standing in the room, and she screamed despite herself.

“Wahhh?!”

“Woah, what?! You startled me.”

“O-Onee-chan?”

The one who had reached out towards the wall and flicked the lights on was Aya. The way her sister looked under the fluorescent lights was so normal, it was... disappointing.

“What were you doing in the dark there? And hold on, you’ve been home?”

“I just got back... Where are Mom and Dad?”

“Didn’t you see they sent a message saying a person at work died and they’d be going to the wake?”

“Uh... sorry, no. I didn’t notice.”

“Saya, you haven’t eaten, right? Should I make something?”

“Nah... Don’t bother. I’ll grab something later. Thanks.”

About to head to her own room, the lights went out. With no time to be surprised, someone leaned over her from behind.

“Why did you leave me behind, Saya?” someone whispered in her ear in the pitch dark room.

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Saya awoke in her bed.

It was her own room. Still dark. Looking at the clock, it was four in the morning.

“...Was it a dream?”

She noticed one of her hands was feeling around above the sheets as if searching for someone. Feeling awkward, she pulled it back in. Combined with the shock of the nightmare, a bed with no one in it beside her felt awfully wide and lonely.

Starting to feel uncertain, she meshed her fingers and pulled on them. They resisted, like they were supposed to. This was definitely Dayland.

While she was looking up at the ceiling and trying to calm herself, something cut across her vision.

It walked through the air with faint glow, like a constellation that had started moving around on its own feet. It passed over Saya and slipped out the window to the veranda, then vanished out of sight.

A Suiju.

Jumping up, she raced to the window, then went out onto the veranda.

The Suiju was nowhere to be seen, but there was no doubting it now. The Suiju were active in Dayland.

Once she noticed it, there was no turning back. Saya encountered twelve Suiju that day. They jumped into her vision one after another, almost as if she had just gained a special ability that let her see fairies.

In the house. On the way to school. Around the school. These aberrant beings that seemed neither living nor artificial moved around under the light of day with no one noticing.

The Suiju appeared to be wandering aimlessly, but she had no way to discern what their motives might be. Even if she did know, Saya couldn't do a thing about them when she wasn't Sleepwalking, and the Suiju showed no apparent interest in Saya.

During class, she spotted a Suiju that looked like a mashup between a seahorse and a set of bagpipes floating through the gap between desks. *How did this happen all of a sudden?* Saya worriedly thought to herself,

The Suiju were supposed to only exist in Nightland. That was what she'd heard from Ran and the others, and Saya hadn't experienced anything that would have suggested otherwise. If they were coming out into Dayland, the entire premise behind the Sleepwalkers would collapse. It would be impossible to make the distinction between what was in sleep, and what was outside of it.

No... Now that she thought of it, there had been just one exception.

Just before she encountered Hitsuji for the second time, when Saya was

wandering around the school searching for her, in her hazy state of consciousness, she had spotted a Suiju heading towards the roof.

That time, Saya's insomnia had gone beyond her limits, and it wouldn't have been odd for her to be hallucinating. However, Saya was no longer tormented by a sleep disorder.

She had already messaged her companions. It turned out that it really was just Saya who could see the Suiju, but the urgency of the situation seemed to get across.

Saya: We're going to gather at the warehouse after school, but can we do an emergency Sleepwalk for now? I want to know what's going on.

Ran: Agreed.

Hitsuji: When and where?

Saya: Lunchtime, the health room.

Ran: Got it.

Hitsuji: Kay. I'll go ahead and secure the bed.

The bell signaling the end of 4th Period rang. Leaving the rising noise of the classroom behind, Saya hurried to the health room.

When she knocked and opened the door, she saw the school doctor passed out at her desk, sleeping. Tip-toeing past her to the beds, Saya pulled back the curtain to find Hitsuji lying there.

"Sorry for the wait," she said, but Hitsuji's eyes stayed shut and she didn't move. "Oh... She's already asleep."

Even when Saya sat down on the bed, Hitsuji didn't wake up. While looking down at Hitsuji, her light hair spread out over the sheets as she breathed softly, Saya thought to herself.

It was kind of a fresh experience, staring at Hitsuji's sleeping face like this. It might even have been the first time. When they went Sleepwalking, she was dragged down into sleep quickly, and the first time they encountered one

another it had happened in no time at all.

The only reason she was able to stay awake now was that she had been getting proper sleep. Even with that, her eyelids were gradually drooping. Hitsuji's Blanket ability was really something.

Fwahhhh, she let out a yawn. Just as she was thinking it was about time that she lie down herself, she heard the door opening. Peeking out from behind the curtain, it was Ran coming in, as she had expected. Shutting the door behind her, Ran came over quickly.

"I'm late. Let's hurry and—" Ran started to say, but then had to cover her mouth to stifle a big yawn. "Whew... Sorry. Let's hurry and get this finished. We can't have this place to ourselves forever, after all."

"I'd feel bad stealing the school doctor's lunch break from her."

Following Saya's lead, Ran took off her shoes and got up on the bed, too. Obviously, one of the health room's single size beds was going to be a tight fit for the three of them.

"Aizome-senpai, will you be all right with the way you move around in your sleep? You won't fall out?"

"Oh, shush. I'm sensitive about that, you know..."

"I was saying it out of concern, but..."

Before they could finish talking, the pure drowsiness unleashed by Hitsuji mercilessly engulfed the two who were laying next to her.

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Looking down from a high-rise building, there were fires rising up here and there around the city. The sound of sporadic gunfire echoed off the walls of the building.

There was the roar of a combat helicopter flying overhead. Armored cars and

soldiers raced around the office district, and tank fire reduced one building to rubble after the next.

I looked down at the scene below me in terror. War had broken out at last. What was going to happen now? Would I survive? Would my family and school be okay...?

Right... speaking of the school, was Hitsuji okay? That girl was a bit out of it, so I worried. I had to hurry up and go get her, but where was I supposed to go?

At that point, a phone left out on the roof began to ring. It was an old, red phone. The kind you might see in a museum or something.

When I picked up the receiver and pressed it to my ear, Hitsuji's voice was on the other line. "Saya, this is a dream."

"Of course. I know that, Hitsuji."

"Do you really?"

"Talking to you cleared my mind."

On the other side of the phone, I felt like I could see Hitsuji frowning with doubt.

With a swish of her coat, Ran set down on the roof.

"Senpai."

"Hokage-san, are you lucid?"

"I'm lucid, lucid, lucid."

"Are you sure? Well, okay. Look at that."

When I looked in the direction she pointed, beyond the city, there was a massive, walking Suiju that rose much higher than any building. Following the cylindrical legs upwards with my eyes, I spotted the form of something like bridge girders up in the clouds.

"It's big."

"Yes. And it's not alone."

I flew up into the sky with Ran. The city and surrounding wasteland were

swarming with long-bodied Suiju. They looked like bridges across a great river that had come to life and started walking around.

“...The Suiju are growing in number, aren’t they?”

“It clearly looks like it.”

While Ran and I were talking, Hitsuji joined into the conversation, still on the other side of the receiver.

“I can’t see it all that well, but what do you think they’re doing?”

Squinting, I saw that the top of the massive, bridge-shaped Suiju was packed tight with smaller Suiju.

Both ends of the bridge were hazy, wrapped in the clouds. On one end, more and more Suiju slowly appeared, and they were heading towards the opposite end.

Trying to watch where the uneven and awkward procession was heading, Ran and I approached the walking bridge. When the clouds cleared, we could see the bridge was over the sea. The legs of the bridge stepped over the smoothly rising curvature of an island, proceeding even further forward.

“I’m starting to smell a sea breeze,” Hitsuji said from the other end of the phone.

“Well, we are out to sea. Where are you watching from, Hitsuji?”

“I don’t really know. Where is this, I wonder...”

Suddenly, Ran gulped. “No way. You’re kidding me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I may have figured it out. Where they’re going.”

“Where would that be?”

“Hokage-san, that island: look at it closely. Do you see anything?”

I focused on the island the bridge’s legs were stepping over. It was an odd one. No trees growing out of it, and no rough rocks, either. The outline of the island was bewitching. If you were to compare to something, it was almost like a human body.

My jaw dropped.

“...Hitsuji?”

“Whaaaat? What about me?” The receiver dropped from my hands, falling to the sea far below.

It wasn’t an island. It was Hitsuji. Hitsuji Konparu. My precious lover. Crossing Hitsuji’s body as she lay down to sleep, the Suiju marched forward. The sea around her was no longer water, but white sheets.

Ran and I were on either side of Hitsuji, too. Lying atop those sheets. It was like I was tied down, my body felt so heavy. When I moved my eyes, at some point a bridge had risen over me, too, and its weight was making me sink into the sheets. Mustering my willpower, my body finally budged, and with all my strength, I sat up. The bridge walking on my body tilted, flipped over, and fell with the many Suiju that had been on top of it.

I screamed.

“Hitsuji! Wake up! They’re getting into Dayland—”

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Saya awoke as if peeling herself away from sleep.

She meant to scream, but only managed a whimper. She felt the hazy thoughts indicative of having forced herself awake, and the sensation of something clinging to her entire body. Trying to clear her head, Saya sat up in bed.

“Konparu-san, wake up,” she said in a hoarse voice, shaking the sleeping Hitsuji’s shoulder. Hitsuji’s eyes stayed closed as she grimaced and groaned.

“Ngh...”

There was something like smoke rising from Hitsuji’s body as she awakened. As Saya looked up, she saw a translucent construct over the bed. Like an insect

hatching from a cocoon, the Suiju that appeared from Hitsuji's body melted into the light of the world of day. She had already lost sight of it, but it wasn't gone; Saya could still feel its dense presence.

On the other side of Hitsuji, who was rubbing her eyes, Ran sat up, too.

"Hokage-san... What just happened?"

"It was a Suiju. One came out again."

Saya's words made Hitsuji cock her head to the side. "I didn't see it. Where did it crawl out of?"

"...Out of Konparu-san's body."

"My body?"

Saya nodded. "The Suiju, they're crossing into Dayland... through our sleep!"

13

Their emergency Sleepwalk ended before the fifteen minutes they had planned; the three who had awakened in a drowsy state hurried to fix their clothes and get out of bed. The noise might have stirred her, because the school doctor raised her face from the desk, looking surprised.

“Huh? Sorry, I didn’t notice you there. What’s up?” she asked, shaking her head in an attempt to clear it. Behind her, Saya could see a Suiju riding on her like some sort of ghost. It looked a lot like the one that had come out of Hitsuji’s body.

The school doctor yawned. “Are you not feeling well? If you want to sleep, the beds are—” she began to ask absentmindedly.

“Oh! Nah, we’re good.” When Saya waved her hands and declined, the school doctor let out another big yawn.

“...Hahh. Sorry. My head’s feeling a little hazy, too.”

“You okay...?” Saya hesitantly asked.

“If you three aren’t going to sleep, maybe I’ll take a little nap myself,” the school doctor said.

As the three watched over her, the school doctor pulled back the curtain and vanished behind it.

“Ohh... Did you three already sleep before asking me? The sheets are a mess,” her sleepy voice came from the other side. “Well, it’s fine, but... If you use the bed, at least make it when you’re done...”

Without waiting for a response, there was a dull thud.

“...Sensei?”

When the three quietly pulled back the curtain, the school doctor was already collapsed face down on the bed. She’d gone to sleep without pulling the blanket over her; her clothes, shoes, and even her glasses still exactly as they were

before.

Saya was vaguely able to see the form of the Suiju over top of the school doctor. Maybe as some reflection of the human state of sleep, the Suiju changed slightly with each breath and eyelid movement. Watching it, it looked less like a beast, and more like a translucent miniature city breathing on top of a human.

“The Suiju’s infected her. Can you two see it?” Saya asked, but Ran and Hitsuji shook their heads.

“I can’t see it.”

“Me, either.”

“I’m the only one who can see it, huh...”

“Looks like. What now? Do another Sleepwalk?” Hitsuji asked. Saya looked to Ran before replying.

“Let’s not. I think we need to figure out what these guys have been doing to us first.”

“That’s true,” Ran agreed. “Let’s save the Suiju hunting till after that. See you after school, at the bed & bedding store.”

“Got it.”

Leaving the sleeping school doctor behind, the three left the health room; it was the middle of lunch break, and the school was bustling with activity. As they walked around in it, Saya gradually turned pale.

“What’s wrong, Saya?” Hitsuji asked, perhaps having noticed something was off.

Saya gulped. “This... could be bad.”

“What could?” Ran peered at Saya’s face.

“The Suiju... they’re increasing in number.”

Saya could see several Suiju walking between the students as they went back and forth. There were some sticking out of people’s bodies, or riding on their heads or shoulders. She even saw some students that had been infected by

several Suiju, and it was if they were dragging some bizarre construct behind them as they walked.

There hadn't been this many half an hour ago.

The cause of the change was blatantly obvious: it was because the three of them had Sleepwalked.

There had been no mistake in what she'd seen in Nightland; the Suiji had built a bridge into Dayland in the three Sleepwalkers' sleep.

The Suiju were rapidly expanding their power... This was the terrifying truth that the five who had gathered at Sakaimori Bed & Bedding had to face.

"We should have noticed sooner, huh," Ran said, sounding frustrated.

"Has nothing like this happened before? Ever?"

Saya asked. The other four shook their heads.

"Not once. I've never heard of it happening elsewhere, either," Midori answered.

"There's no stories about this sort of thing in your house, Aizome-senpai? In books of legends, or something like that?"

"Not in the materials I've inherited, at least."

"There's nothing in your house, either, Sakaimore-san?"

"No, nothing."

"That means this is a new phenomenon..."

Saya murmured, and Midori hung her head.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of help."

"Don't sweat it, Midori. Let's all think about it together, okay?" Kaede comforted her in a gentle tone of voice.

"Let's sort this out. What's happening isn't that complicated," Saya said as she rose from the sofa. "First off, there are Suiju coming into Dayland. Only I can see them, but if you believe me, it's an undeniable fact."

“I believe you,” Hitsuji, who had been quiet up until this point, said quietly. The other three nodded.

“Thanks. Next, as for how they came, that’s something Aizome-senpai and I have both seen. The Suiju have been passing from Nightland into Dayland through our sleep.”

Ran nodded. “It was a large, bridge-like Suiju. There were several of them, using us as stepping stones to build a path into Dayland... and there were smaller Suiju crossing over it,” she added.

“I noticed because I saw the bridge being built over Hitsuji in Nightland, but it wasn’t just Hitsuji. Aizome-senpai and I, we both thought we were lucid, but at some point they made us into stepping stones. I noticed while it was happening, but by that point a lot of Suiju had already gotten into Dayland.”

Midori furrowed her brow. “That’s ridiculously scary. Do you mean that if you hadn’t noticed, it would have been even worse?”

“I think so,” Saya replied. “I mean, who knows how many times something similar has happened before now...”

“Seriously...?”

In response to the dubious look on Kaede’s face, Saya said, “We’ve been losing control in our dreams a lot lately, right? Thinking about it now, I bet that was the Suiju’s handiwork, too.”

“They may have been experimenting,” Midori interjected.

“Experimenting?”

“This is working under the assumption that the Suiju are intelligent, but... What if they let us believe we were acting with lucidity, while they actually seized control and used us as stepping stones? Doesn’t it feel like they’re pulling off something rather advanced here?”

“Like a computer virus, huh...” Ran said, deep in thought.

“But viruses aren’t intelligent. They aren’t, right? Maybe they can do advanced stuff whether they’re intelligent or not? Whoa, I just said something super smart. Am I awesome, or what?” Kaede said.

Midori patted Kaede on the head as she finished talking with a look of surprise on her face. “That’s certainly true. Either way, there’s no question that the Suiju have been looking into us.”

“They used us, and infected even more people in Dayland... but what reason do they have to bother coming out into Dayland in the first place?”

“Sleepwalkers get in the way in Nightland, so they think they’ve outwitted us this way, or something...? That’s just a guess, though.”

“This has become a problem. At this rate, there’s going to be an explosive outbreak of Suiju in Dayland and we’re going to be at the center of it,” Ran said with a deep sigh. “In Dayland, there’s nothing we can do about the Suiju. But, that said, if we Sleepwalk, they’ll seize control and the infection will spread.”

“Then... does that mean there’s nothing we can do?” Saya plopped herself down on the sofa.

“That’s not true, Hokage-san. You and the others were able to notice what the Suiju were doing to us in our sleep. We weren’t able to figure out why we were in bad condition before, but now things are different. If we all stay on guard, whoever notices can make the others lucid,” Midori said.

“Yeah. We know from the get-go that they’ll be trying to trick us.” Saya nodded.

“Let’s do this thing!” Kaede passionately exclaimed. “I hate that they’ve gotten away with this so far.”

While Saya and the others were talking, Hitsuji had just been sitting there hugging a cushion, her eyes on Saya. Unable to handle the awkwardness any longer, Saya turned the conversation to her. “Do you have anything to add, Hitsuji?”

“Huh?” Hitsuji blinked like a student who’d been called on by the teacher while dozing off in class. “Oh, uh, nothing really.”

“Are you okay, Konparu-san?” Ran looked dubiously at Hitsuji’s face.

“Sorry, I was a bit out of it.”

“Keep yourself together, Hitsuji,” Saya said.

Ran smiled. “You’ve gotten awfully close with Konparu-san, haven’t you?”

“Huh?”

“Her name,” Ran said. “Hokage-san, you were so stubborn about calling her Konparu-san before, so when did you end up using her first name instead?”

“Oh...” Saya was taken aback by the unexpected call out. She hadn’t been conscious of it at all, nor could she remember when she’d started doing it. When she looked in Hitsuji’s direction, Hitsuji averted her eyes. Had she been acting overly familiar? It looked like she still hadn’t been forgiven for kissing her when she was still sleep-addled the first time they met.

While Saya was feeling awkward, Kaede slapped her on the back. “It’s good to get along. Sayacchi’s always been holding back. Right, Hitsujicchi?”

“...Maybe,” Hitsuji whispered curtly.

Ran downed the rest of her tea and then stood up.

“Okay. Let’s go, then. It’s open season on Suiju.”

14

While I was lying in bed, Mom called from downstairs. She was going to go see my grandmother in the hospital, so she wanted me to drive with her.

It was a pain, but my grades had been less than stellar of late, so I wasn't in a good position to refuse. In any case, it wasn't like I was doing anything I couldn't walk away from at the moment, so I dragged myself downstairs, and left the house with Mom. I went into the garage, got in the car, turned the key in the ignition, somehow managed to get out onto the street without hitting anything, and drove towards town.

I quickly regretted it. I didn't have a license, after all.

Why in the world had I told her I would drive? I was going to crash, and crash hard. There was no way I wouldn't. With a frightened grip on the wheel, I drove along, swerving occasionally, as I did my best to imitate the other drivers on the road. I could just barely understand the brakes and the accelerator, but I had no grasp for exactly how much force to put into either. I'd think I was stepping lightly on the gas, only to go far faster than I'd ever expected, and then when I hurriedly pressed the brake we screeched to a stop. The way I was driving was terribly awkward, and I could tell the cars around me were bothered by it.

While I was busy breaking into an unpleasant sweat, we headed onto a bridge over a river. The bridge was congested with traffic, and there were a lot of cars separated into a number of lanes slowly progressing across it.

That's when my driving finally fell apart.

In a situation with cars both ahead of and behind me, with nowhere to go, I stepped down on the accelerator too hard. I panicked, and spun the wheel. That spared me from a collision with the car in front, but I rammed into the bridge's railing instead.

That I didn't do it at high speed was a small saving grace, but the engine stopped, and the car stopped moving entirely. More and more cars stopped

behind me, creating a traffic jam, and I could only watch on with a feeling of despair.

It started to rain lightly. The layer of water running across the windshield blurred the scenery outside as I watched.

I heard the rear door closing. Looking in the rear-view mirror, there was no sign of my mother, who should have been riding in the back. In the rain-blurred scenery outside the vehicle I could see a familiar silhouette getting further and further away. She must have gotten out because she was angry at me for crashing.

While I was listening to the sound of the rain on the car's body, feeling lonely and in a dazed lonely stupor, there was a sudden hurried knocking on the window right beside my face.

When I turned to look in shock, a fist hit the glass again, right in front of my eyes. *Knock, knock, knock!* When I recoiled in fear, this time it wasn't a fist, but a metal tool—a long wrench meant for tightening the nuts on the wheels—which slammed into the window. The glass shattered, and I covered my face without meaning to.

“Saya! This is a dream!”

I was relieved when I saw the face that popped in through the hole in the glass: it was Hitsuji standing outside the car. Without waiting for my reply, she went about using the wrench to remove what glass had remained after the shattering. Like I was coming up out of the water, my consciousness cleared rapidly.

Hitsuji looked at me right in the eye. “Hurry and get out. It's dangerous here.”

Maybe it was because of the force of the impact, but the door was warped and wouldn't open. I wriggled my way out through the broken driver's seat window instead.

I fell to the road where shards of glass were scattered and then stood up, brushing my hair back behind my ear. “Hitsuji, what a coincidence. Fancy meeting you in a place like this.”

“Come on, get it together. If you aren't lucid, we're going to have problems.”

Her angry face was adorable, too. I wanted to hug her. Just as I was about to do so, a steam whistle sounded somewhere.

From beyond the girders of the bridge, through the curtain of rain, there was a massive, many-decked luxury cruise liner approaching. The ship was coming straight for the packed bridge.

With no sign of it attempting to stop, the prow finally made contact. There was an ear-rending screech of metal as the bridge broke and cars poured out of the open gash one after another and fell.

The ground at my feet rapidly tilted, and both my body and Hitsuji's started to slide along the asphalt, too. Before there was any time to respond, we were cast out into the air, the black surface of the water fast approaching.

There was an intense splash, and a shadow the size of a whale jumped out of the river. Looking like what you might get if you combined a nuclear submarine with a person, it was Kaede in mermaid form. She caught us with her chest. "You awake?" she asked.

"Clearly not."

When Kaede opened her mouth wide to laugh at what I said, shark-like teeth peeked out from inside.

The luxury cruise liner, which was still going, finally bisected the bridge. The bridge should have been made from a steel frame, but it was as cheap as crafts made with wooden chopsticks and it kept falling to pieces. The train up on top of the bridge had lost its detail, too, and now it just looked like a wad of scrap paper. When I saw all the little legs coming out of it flailing around, it finally hit me that it had been a swarm of Suiju.

Ran and Midori flew in from the air, setting down on Kaede's shoulders. Ran looked around to each of us. "Everyone's lucid, right? Pay attention to what the others say. If someone's acting weird, raise the alert immediately. There's no question the Suiju are trying to cripple our minds."

"As a general rule, I'll be monitoring everyone, but it's highly likely I'll be affected myself without realizing it. So... while I'm sorry to have to ask this of you, please subtly check on me occasionally, too..." Midori added.

“Gotcha. So, what do we do from here?” Hitsuji asked.

“Let’s search for where the Suiju are coming from,” I replied. “They’re appearing somewhere, and heading to Dayland through our sleep. We find where that is, and crush it.”

Leaving the bridge to collapse and fall into the river, we made landfall on the shore of the river. A swarm of car-like Suiju kept coming in from somewhere, and they stopped where the bridge had once been. With the traffic congestion getting worse, the Suiju up front started to get pushed and fall in.

“It’s gonna be a real pain in the butt taking them all out, huh,” Kaede said with a troubled look as she transformed into a four-legged centaur-like creature. She created a long lance out of the void, and started poking at the swarm of Suiju, but there was no end to them.

Ran clambered up onto Kaede’s back. “Let’s leave them for now. I think it would be a bad idea to let them take up our time here. We have to figure out where these guys came from, and eliminate the source of the flow, or it won’t matter how many we kill.”

“I agree. So long as we remain lucid, the Suiju can’t get into Dayland. Conversely, if we’re drowning in our dreams, our sleep will become a passage to Dayland,” Midori said.

“Uh, hey, if we get too obsessed with hunting Suiju, could that make us lose lucidity...?” When I interjected, Midori looked up, seemingly taken aback.

“That could be possible. The act of hunting Suiju might itself have been a trap to make Sleepwalkers indulge in their dreams...”

Hitsuji cocked her head to the side. “Wait, do you mean we’ve been caught in their trap for a long time now?”

“I’d prefer not to think so. It was just recently that the Suiju changed how they acted, too.”

“Hey, hey, do we have time for idle chit-chat like this? If we’re gonna find where the Suiju are coming from, shouldn’t we get moving?” Kaede said impatiently.

“You have a point. Let’s go. Don’t split up too much... We should probably stick close together.”

“You can ride on me. I’ll carry you!”

When Kaede took off running on four legs, I hurriedly jumped on her, too. The metal plating that had carried over from when she was half-submarine was, kindly enough, outfitted with ladders and handrails.

With the four of us on her back, Kaede raced across the asphalt. When Suiju came at her sometimes she avoided them, while others she stabbed them with her spear, or trampled them under her mechanical hooves as she ran towards the interior lands of Nightland.

There was a single road, atop the reddish brown soil, in a wasteland with scattered patches of dried grass, stretching on forever. Every once in a while a swarm of Suiju walked toward us from the other side, passed by, and vanished into the distance.

Eventually, the once straight road began to twist and turn. The slope of the ground grew more difficult, rising and falling, forming big waves. The number of trees in the area went up, and the next thing we knew we were racing through a deep forest.

Up on Kaede’s back, we were sitting around a tea set. Midori brought a cup to her lips and frowned.

“It’s no good, after all. There’s no flavor.”

“When did you make that...? Sakaimori-san, are you okay? Are you lucid?”

“Sorry, I am lucid. I thought the flavor would let me know I was in a dream.”

“Oh, I see.”

“You can have some, too, if you’d like, Hokage-san.”

“Nah, I’m good. Even if I know it’s a dream, drinking stuff makes me want to go to the washroom.”

“Oh, that happens to me, too,” Ran enthusiastically agreed. “It doesn’t taste like anything, so I don’t know what makes my bladder think it can make me want to go to the bathroom. It’s not fair.”

“I feel you. Any time there’s a toilet in my dreams, I get tense. Even in Dayland, there are times I get confused. It’s scary.”

Maybe it was because Hitsuji said that with a straight face, but Kaede got uneasy. “Whoa, don’t any of you go wetting yourselves on my back, okay?!” she shouted.

The way she sounded genuinely worried about it made us all laugh.

“You’ve never experienced anything like that, Kaede?”

“I always transform when I’m Sleepwalking, so I can tell it’s a dream. If you’d all do it, too, you wouldn’t wet the bed.”

“We’re just not as good at transforming as you, Kaede.”

“You all lack imagination.”

While Kaede puffed her chest up with pride, Hitsuji pursed her lips. That pouty face was so adorable I couldn’t help but interject.

“Hitsuji, I won’t laugh at you even if you do wet the bed.”

I nailed it. That was a cool line, if I do say so myself...

Or so I thought, but then I realized Hitsuji was squinting her eyes and scrutinizing me.

“Hey, I’m pretty sure she’s not lucid right now.”

“Hasn’t she always been like this?” Midori asked.

“Sayacchi’s always been this kind of girl, hasn’t she?”

“I think Hokage-san acts weird any time she’s around Konparu-san.”

Hearing them assess me, I wasn’t sure what they meant, but it was kind of embarrassing, so I scratched my head. “Aw, c’mon. Don’t compliment me so much. It’s embarrassing.”

“Ah! I knew she was no good! Hold her down!”

“Hold on! Don’t fight on my back!”

The tea in our dreams had no flavor, but the forehead flicks in our dreams hurt like crazy. It got me lucid, sure, but it wasn’t fair.

Beneath a sky full of bright stars, lucid and causing a ruckus, we continued down the twisting path. Into the inner lands of the dream, towards the Suiju's nest... After each and every one of us had started to lose lucidity three or four times, we finally reached our destination.

In the forest, there was a slope that formed the shape of a mortar and a spring at the bottom of it. If you squinted through the trembling of the water, there was an egg that appeared to be made of hewed crystal. The egg shone from within, and the diffused reflection of that glimmer took form on top of the water, rising out of the spring as a variety of Suiju. Big ones, small ones, pretty ones, ugly ones. The Suiju crawled up the slope with awkward movements, setting out on the long road to Dayland.

"This is... a Suiju nest," Ran whispered. For a while, we stared, entranced, at the spring. "So this was how they work."

"You mean Suiju are born from that egg?" Kaede asked.

"That's how it looks, but... Does it actually work the way it looks like?"

"Phenomena in Nightland often work differently than they appear to, but we can at least be sure that the Suiju are coming out of there," Ran explained.

"Okay, so we just bust them up and we're good, right?" Kaede let out the growl of a carnivorous beast. It seemed certain that the one with the most direct grudge against the Suiju was Kaede.

This was when I finally noticed Hitsuji had been keeping quiet. When I looked beside me, she was leaning so far off Kaede's back it looked like she might fall, staring intently at the spring.

"Hitsuji? That's dangerous."

When I went to hug her close from behind, Hitsuji suddenly spoke up. "That's it."

"Huh?"

"I've... been looking for those."

In that moment, my head was filled with a burst of memory.

The egg! Right! That was the egg Hitsuji had been searching Nightland for all

this time!

Even though I had been so desperate to make everyone remember, at some point I had forgotten about them myself. Though that fact shocked me, I tried to warn everyone. “Hey, everyone, it’s the thing! The thing I kept bringing up!”

“I just remembered, too...” Ran said, sounding bewildered.

“Me, too. I think we’ve been doing the same sort of thing over and over,” Kaede added.

“It’s the same for me... Why? We should be lucid now,” said Midori.

“This memory is weird. It’s like someone’s trying to hide it. No matter how many times we try to remember, we forget.” While saying that, I looked back down and every hair in my body stood on end. The Suiju that showed no sign of recognizing us before all stopped where they were, focusing their attentions on us. The atmosphere around the spring under the moonlight, something I would even have called beautiful, changed to become tense in an instant.

“Anyway, it seems we’ve found what we’re after,” Ran said. Without taking our eyes off the Suiju, we jumped off Kaede’s back and down to the ground. “If we destroy that, we may be able to exterminate all the Suiju. Let’s take it out before we forget again.”

“Okay, let’s do this.” With a loud whooshing sound, a hatch opened up in Kaede’s back. Missile after missile launched out of it, raining down on the Suiju from above.

In the time it took them to touch down, we prepared to fight, too. Ran rode on a black lion, Midori on a polar bear, and I on an antelope with heads on the front and back of its body. Hitsuji was the only one to remain on foot, using her usual outfit with the golden gauntlets.

“Charge!” Ran raised her saber and shouted.

We rushed down the hill, slamming into the horde of Suiju. Everyone was shouting. I was firing wildly with an elephant gun as we headed for the spring, too.

With chunks of Suiju flying around like a storm, Hitsuji was the first to reach

the spring. With no sign of fear, she stepped into the water, heading for the crystal egg. The Suiju that had just been born were pummeled by the golden gauntlets and blasted to smithereens.

Hitsuji's hands lifted the egg from the water. The egg she was holding aloft in both hands began to shine even more intensely the moment it touched the air. Feeling a sense of urgency at the way Hitsuji was staring at it, as if entranced, I shouted. "Hitsuji! Smash it!"

Hitsuji had spaced out for a brief moment, but her eyes regained focus. I kept pulling the trigger to keep the Suiju that were pressing in from all sides from reaching Hitsuji. For just one brief moment, Hitsuji's eyes met mine. Hitsuji nodded, squeezing down with both hands.

The egg was crushed, and yet more light leaked out. My vision went all white, and my consciousness rapidly grew distant—

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There was a bed which spread out, with no gaps, as far as the eye could see. The sea of sheets continued all the way from my feet to the horizon. In it lay countless people. Some in pajamas, some naked, some wearing eye masks, some tied up, some covered in blood... There were people of all ages, of many races, in many positions, wearing many different outfits, but all of them, without exception, were lying down and sleeping.

Right next to me lay Ran, Kaede, and Midori. Looking a little further away, I could see some familiar faces here and there. My classmates from school, the teacher, and my parents and sister.

There was a low buzz from many people's snores, their mumbling, and their unintelligible groans filling the air. In the middle of a scene that resembled all of humanity sleeping, Hitsuji and I were the only ones standing there, awake.

"Hitsuji, what happened here?" I asked.

“I dunno... Where is this? Nightland, right?” Hitsuji replied in a daze.

There was no way I could know that. Above us was the sky of Nightland where the moon and stars shone brightly, but I had never seen a place like this before on any Sleepwalk.

“Aizome-senpai... Kaede... Midori!” I called their names and tried shaking them, but no one woke up.

“Hey, Saya. What do you think that is?”

When I looked up in response to Hitsuji’s voice, at some point a corner of the sky had been blotted out by something big and black. Was it a Suiju? Its full form was impossible to make out, but a long, twisting, flexible structure like an elephant’s trunk was dangling from the darkness towards the ground.

Each time that nose passed through the air above one of the sleeping people, I realized it was sucking up something shiny. They looked like the Suiju egg that had been in the spring before.

When the nose approached us, there was a change in Ran, Kaede, and Midori. Unlike the people sleeping around them, concrete images were sucked out of each of them. A flying ship, a sparkling magical sword, a procession of camels, a fleet of paper airplanes, a rocket thrust into the moon, flowers of every color, students taking a class, a snow-covered mountain... These disjointed visions arose, and then were sucked up—as if being attacked with a vacuum cleaner—and vanished.

Instinctively, I thought this was bad. I didn’t have any clue what was going on, but something clearly not good was happening here. I let out an unintelligible shout, then did what I could to stop the harvesting of images. The moment I did, I was struck by a bizarre sensation, and I gasped. The gun I had to create on the spot, and the beast that was a manifestation of my hostility were torn from me before they could fully take shape.

It wasn’t just me, Hitsuji was screaming, too.

“Saya! Saya, help—They’re taking everything away!”

Doing my best to at least hold the frightened Hitsuji tight, I—

15

The five sat bolt upright, each screaming something incomprehensible.

“Ahh! Ahhhh!”

“Wh... What happened?!”

“I-I don’t understand. The dream suddenly ended, like it was shut down...”

Ran said several minutes after the panic had passed and she was finally able to talk again. “What happened to the Suiju? Was anyone able to see it through to the end?”

They all shook their heads.

“I remember we smashed the egg. But only up to there...” Ran’s face was stiff as she thought about it, but eventually she looked up. “Let’s go again.”

“Can’t we rest? My head’s feeling kinda fuzzy...” Kaede said with a dull look on her face, but Ran shook her head.

“We have to figure out what happened. Once we’ve confirmed the situation, we’ll come right back.”

Saya pressed on her temples and shut her eyes tight. It felt like she’d taken an awful lot of damage, but she had no idea where she’d been hurt, or how. Looking down to where she felt a tug on her clothes, Hitsuji was looking unusually forlorn as she pulled at Saya’s sleeve. When Saya lovingly reached out and grasped her hand, Hitsuji squeezed hers back.

The five of them laid down again in a bed still damp with the sweat they had shed while sleeping in it. Even if their Sleepwalk was interrupted, if they resumed it immediately, they could enter the same dream. Saya knew this from experience.

The blanket of drowsiness Hitsuji unleashed wrapped around them all, soothing their heightened nerves, and the five resumed their Sleepwalk to the spring from before.

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We woke up in bed.

Heavy clouds looked down on us from outside the warehouse's skylight.

"Huh? What happened?"

"I thought we went on another Sleepwalk..."

We looked at one another in bewilderment. It looked like something had stirred us; Ran let out a sigh of resignation.

"Looks like it's not going to work today... I guess that's that."

"Let's rest a little. I'll make tea now." Midori was the first to rise from the bed, rushing off to the kitchen.

Not long after, the water had risen to a boil, and the scent of coffee filled the air. Holding our still sleep-addled heads, we sat around the sofa like usual.

"I bought *guimauves* for today."

"Wow, fancy."

"Are they fancy?"

"They were in style a number of years back."

With the colorful marshmallow cubes laid out on the plate in front of me, I started to cheer up a bit. Midori poured coffee into each of our mugs.

"Okay, everyone—" Having picked up a *guimauve* as she spoke and carried it to her mouth, Midori stopped still.

Her eyes went wide like she had seen something terrifying, and she was frozen stiff. Noticing something was off, Ran tried talking to her.

"Midori...?"

In a dumbfounded tone of voice, Midori whispered: "It has... no taste."

With those words, the *guimauves* on the plate turned to sand and collapsed.

We stood up in shock, and around us the tall shelves that surrounded the bedroom began to shake and the rows of boxes all immediately burst open.

From beyond the shelves, evil bugs with lots of eyes, legs, and poisonous mandibles appeared, and they began to tear us to shreds.

From the ceiling the great face of some unknown person peered in, watching us expressionlessly as we screamed.

16

“Where are you going, Saya?”

Hearing someone call after her as she put on her shoes and was about to leave the house, Saya turned to look back. It was Aya in her tracksuit, leaning against the wall, looking at her listlessly. There were terrible bags under her eyes, and her hair was a mess.

“Onnee-chan... You okay?”

“Not at all. You?”

When Saya shook her head, Aya let out an exhausted sigh.

“I never really appreciated how bad you had it. This is how bad it is not being able to sleep, huh?”

Saya just nodded.

It had been days now since her sister was afflicted with insomnia. It wasn't just Aya—her parents had, too. It seemed that for the time being, they could force themselves to sleep for a few hours with sleeping pills, but their effectiveness seemed to be gradually weakening.

“Where are you going?” Aya asked.

“I'm gonna go see my friends.”

“Ohh, the Napping Club, was it? Are they all managing to sleep?”

“Uh... Not so much lately.” When Saya gave a sort of evasive answer, Aya gave her a vague nod.

“I sympathize. Seriously. I hope you can all get some good sleep.”

“Yeah.”

“If you're heading out, be careful. You're out of it from the lack of sleep, too,” Aya said, then turned to leave. Saya could vaguely make out the indistinct outline of a Suiju from her neck to her shoulders. Saya guiltily averted her eyes,

opening the door to go out.

Dream Impoverishment—Midori had told her there was a term like that.

It referred to the state of being unable to remember dreams when one woke. Ever since becoming a Sleepwalker, she had remembered the dreams she was lucid in clearly, but now she hardly remembered a single thing they did in Nightland.

At the same time, she was also struck by an intense sense of déjà vu. The barely lingering scraps of dreams she remembered would make her feel that she must have experienced the same things before, and it was common that as she tried to escape the loop in which she was trapped, she would wake up.

It was also becoming more and more common for her to get confused as to whether she was in Nightland or Dayland. She might be walking through the school when she kicked off the ground in an attempt to fly, only to land flat on her face, or unconsciously start trying to cross a busy street. Because she had repeatedly had chilling experiences like that, she had developed a habit of pulling on her fingers all the time.

While trying to encourage each other, the five of them had tried Sleepwalking a number of times, but the situation only got worse.

“We’ve been cast out of sleep...”

Those words Ran mumbled were an apt representation of the current situation. Their Sleepwalking abilities had fallen to pieces, as if afflicted by an infection. Hitsuji’s Blanket was unstable, knocking out her companions in situations where she didn’t intend for it to. Kaede couldn’t control her transformations, and she would turn into unsightly monstrosities that caused both her and the others to panic.

Worse yet, even their normal sleep had been eaten away at. They had completely lost control of their dreams, and it was nothing short of terrifying for them to enter Nightland with their memories unstable. They had simply returned to dreaming normally without lucidity, but having experienced life as Sleepwalkers, it was an unbearable experience.

To top it all off, number of Suiju overflowing into Dayland was gradually increasing. Saya would spot the Suiju wandering about in open daylight and possessing those who passed by whether she wanted to or not. The number of people around her who experienced Suiju-induced sleep disorders was increasing proportionately, too. At home and at school, there was nothing but people possessed by Suiju. They stumbled around, bags under their eyes, some suddenly collapsing and falling asleep, while others would see nightmares and scream... The explosive outbreak they had feared had begun. The Suiju invasion of Dayland was rapidly progressing, and this town was at ground zero.

Saya and the others had been set up; as time went by, her suspicion of that grew deeper. The Suiju used their curiosity about the Egg as bait, leading Saya and the others to open a pathway to Dayland. Even the fact that their memories of the Egg became vague was most likely a trick to catch their interest. No one had thought the Suiju could think like that. They'd completely outwitted Saya and the others.

Whenever she went out, like it or not, she was forced to confront the reality they themselves had brought about. But even if she stayed in the house, her sense of guilt was agitated by seeing her family suffering with insomnia. When she finally couldn't take it anymore, Saya went outside, hanging her head and walking in silence. She visited Sakaimori Bed & Bedding for the first time in a long time.

No one was in the warehouse. She heard nothing but her own footsteps, the dust dancing transiently in the light that poured in from the skylight.

It was like the first time she came here.

The king-size bed laid out in the middle of the bedroom had been left as it was when they last used it, the sheets and blankets wrinkled.

If someone else were here, she thought that might help assuage her feelings, but she had guessed wrong. Now that their success with Sleepwalking had fallen off entirely, their spirits were broken and no one came here anymore.

She collapsed on the large bed.

What was going to happen now...? While she lay there silently in the warehouse, still burdened with her insecurities, she suddenly sensed a

presence.

Clop, clop. Clop, clop. The sound of something hard on the floor. Not shoes... hooves.

The hooded man riding the goat appeared from between the shelves.

“We meet again, Neversleeper.”

“This is... a dream?”

“Is this dream or reality? Whichever it is, all will become a dream soon. They set you all up.”

The man pulled on the reins when he was in front of the bed, turning to face Saya.

“The Suiju have done this many times. Luring Sleepwalkers into a trap, and turning Dayland to Nightland. That which had been reality turned to dream, and a new Dayland began as if nothing had ever happened. Thus, the Sleepwalkers turned to dreams, too, and vanished. Just as we once did. And as, at this very moment, you are all in the process of doing.”

“Then... You’re a Sleepwalker, too?”

The man nodded his hooded head.

“In my Dayland, I was a member of the CIA’s Dreamwatchers unit. Our team, GOAT, cooperated with Dreamerwatchers around the world, working to chase down the Suiju as an organization. However... That fact no longer exists— it became a dream and vanished. My entire team is gone, too. I’m no more than a lingering fragment of a dream, wandering Nightland. And so, you people will be the next to go through the same.”

“We’ll be... made into dreams, too?”

“Yes. But there is a factor in play for you that wasn’t for us. It may become your last hope.”

“What?”

“You, Neversleeper.”

The man reached out his from where he sat in the saddle, pointing at Saya.

“You alone can maintain your sanity when insomnia lasts too long. So, too, can you alone see the Suiju that have appeared in Dayland. In short, you are able to exist in both Dayland and Nightland at the same time.”

“Even if that’s true... What do you want me to do about it? How am I supposed to stop what’s happening now?”

“No one shall sleep,” the goat-rider whispered cryptically in response to Saya’s irritation.

“Hokage-san?” Saya came to when Midori called her name.

When she sat up in bed, Midori was looking down at Saya.

“Oh... Hey.”

“Heya, Sayacchi. How ya doing?” Kaede poked her head out from behind Midori.

“What are you two doing here?”

“I could ask you the same, Hokage-san.”

“I just thought... someone might be here if I came.”

Midori and Kaede exchanged glances, then smiled a little.

“We were thinking that, too. Right, Midori?” Kaede asked.

“Right.”

“I know we can’t Sleepwalk and all, but it felt so lonely not being able to see everyone.”

“Have a seat on the sofa. I’ll make tea.”

At Midori’s urging, Saya stood up. She looked around, but the goat rider was nowhere to be found.

Well, of course not. There’s no way that was real. While she was trying to refocus herself, Saya’s eyes were drawn to the floor. Next to the bed, there were four small indentations gouged into surface of the concrete that looked like hoof marks.

“Sakaimori-san... Were those always there?”

When Saya pointed at them, Midori turned around to look, then furrowed her brow.

“I’m not sure. They look like marks left by a pallet... Was there something about them?”

Marks left by a pallet? Now that she said that, it certainly did look like that’s what they might be. It was a more logical explanation than to think a man riding a goat had been there. But...

Saya went over the earlier experience in her head. For some time now, likely due to Suiju interference, Saya and the rest of the group had been unable to bring back memories from Nightland, but she had been left with an awfully clear recollection this time.

The words that man had spoken stuck in her head.

“...No one shall sleep.”

Saya’s mumblings got an unexpected response.

“Is that *Turandot*?”

When she looked up, Ran had appeared from between the shelves, sitting down on the sofa like everything was perfectly normal.

“Senpai, why are you here?”

“For the same reasons as you, I suspect.”

With what almost felt like calculated timing, Midori brought out mugs and started pouring coffee.

“What’s *Turandot*?”

“The title of an opera. Long ago, Princess *Turandot* of China is given a riddle by a prince. If she can’t guess his name by sunrise, she must marry him, but if she does, he will give up on the marriage and offer up his life. That’s where the princess proclaims to the people of her country: until they discover the prince’s name, no one shall sleep.”

“Huh? Harsh much?!” Kaede raised her voice in criticism.

“It is harsh, isn’t it? I can understand her not wanting to get married, though.”

“What a slave driver. Like, it has nothing to do with the people.”

“The people... huh,” Saya mumbled to herself, looking at the one mug on the table that remained empty. Hitsuji’s mug. “Do you think Hitsuji will come?”

“I... don’t think she’ll be coming.” Ran said.

“Why is that?”

“Her Blanket ability has always been too powerful. When Hitsuji sleeps, whether she means for them to or not, the people around her fall asleep, too. That’s why she was choosing deserted places to sleep before, but now it’s gotten so strong that little tricks like that aren’t enough anymore.”

Kaede chimed in, “I was worried about Hitsujicchi, too, so I tried going to her house, but it was no good. Even getting close was risky.”

“Risky how?”

“You get sleepy. It’s totally nuts. Her range has expanded, so it’s really dangerous. The only way someone could get close to Hitsujicchi and take it would be if they were a Neversleeper like you, Sayacchi.”

While she listened, internally, Saya was shocked. Hitsuji had never said a word of this to her.

“Hokage-san, could you go check on her later?” Ran asked. Saya didn’t respond.

“Hokage-san?”

“Huh? Ohh, sorry... Listen, I have a question. Just how far can Hitsuji’s blanket ability stretch?”

“Konparu-san is always suppressing it, but if she wanted to... I can’t imagine how far she might be able to spread it.”

“Oh, yeah...?”

As Saya thought about it, the other three looked at her dubiously. Eventually, Saya raised her head. “I have an idea—Will you hear me out?”

17

When she opened the front door to greet Saya, Hitsuji had bags under her eyes, making it clear as day that she had not been getting proper sleep.

“Whoa. Your face looks awful.” Saya said, prompting an angry look to appear on Hitsuji’s face.

“What do you want?”

“I’ve got something to discuss. Can I come in?”

“...You can.”

Though she acted suspicious, Hitsuji invited Saya inside. The house was silent, with no sign of anyone but the two of them.

“You’re alone?”

“Yeah. My parents evacuated to my grandparents’ place. Because, of course... being my parents, they’re well aware of my sleepy, sleepy powers. I’m enjoying the single life, now.”

“Oh, I see... My family, on the other hand, are all suffering from insomnia. Come over and play sometime. For their sake.”

“I’d be fine with that, but it’s the getting there that’s the problem. When I’m walking down the road, passing drivers fall asleep at the wheel.” As she spoke, Hitsuji cocked her head to the side and scrutinized Saya. “...You’re not sleepy, Saya?”

“I’m super sleepy. But I can still take it.”

Even as she said that, a yawn slipped out. If Saya was like this despite her resistance, someone who wasn’t a Neversleeper wouldn’t have lasted thirty seconds.

“Hmm. Well, don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I know that... Fwah.”

When they entered Hitsuji's room, she was met by the gazes of stuffed animals lined up on Hitsuji's bed.

"Just sit wherever," Hitsuji said curtly, sitting down on the chair at her desk. When Saya tried to sit on the floor, Hitsuji pointed to the bed.

"You sure?"

"I'll give you special permission. I'll even let you hug just one of my stuffed animals, too."

"Okay. Well... Don't mind if I do." Saya sat down on Hitsuji's bed and hugged a big owl. The soft terrycloth smelled just like Hitsuji.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"Before that, why didn't you tell me?"

"Hm?"

"That your Blanket ability had gotten so strong you couldn't go outside. When I found out everyone but me knew, it was a real shock."

"I didn't want to make you worry any more than I had to."

"That's being way too distant! Okay, maybe if this was back when we'd just met, I could have accepted it, but now... we're already... well, you know! Am I wrong? Was I the only one who felt that way?!"

"That's... got nothing to do with this."

"It does, too! This plan... if no one had told me, I could never have come up with it!"

"What plan?"

"The plan that's going to get us out of this mess. So we can take out the Suiju, and rest peacefully."

"Oh, yeah...?"

Urged on by the dubious look Hitsuji gave her, Saya began to explain her idea.

"For all this time up until now, you've been leading me to sleep, right? I was wondering what'd happen if we tried the opposite."

“Hm? So, basically... What does that mean?”

“Instead of having you sleep at my side, I sleep at yours. Basically, I act as your Blanket.”

“And what happens then?”

“We can make everyone but us insomniacs.”

“Huh?” Hitsuji blinked. “Erm... First off, aren’t they kind of turning out that way already?”

“It’s not enough. We’ll take even more from them. Make them completely unable to sleep. Sorry to say it, but if you call yourself an insomniac when you can still use sleep meds to get to sleep, you’re just a poser. I’ll show them what real sleeplessness is.”

While Saya rambled on quickly, Hitsuji gave her a suspicious look.

“Saya, when did you betray humanity?”

“I don’t mean forever, obviously. It’ll be temporary. Probably. Just for a little while...”

“This is already sounding dodgy.”

“You were saying all of Nightland is connected, right? If the Suiju are using humans as a medium to increase their numbers, that means they can’t survive without sleep. With humans, when there’s someone awake, someone else is asleep, and if they move from sleep to sleep they can exist forever. Normally, at least.”

“And you want to eliminate that sleep? Is that possible?”

“Not on my own. But you have your Blanket ability, don’t you? We’ll share a bit of my insomnia with everyone using your power. The only sleep left in Nightland will be mine and yours. If we do that...”

“If we do that...?”

“If there’s no one else sleeping, the Suiju have no choice but to come into our sleep, right? Then we wake up together.”

“Take them all out in one fell swoop. You’ve thought this through,” Hitsuji

said in a quiet voice. Saya felt a tinge of uncertainty as she continued to string her words together.

“I mean, obviously, I question whether it’s okay to do it. We’d be affecting all of humanity. But I think we have to do it now. If we don’t, we’ll all turn to dreams...”

Hitsuji stood up and came closer. She stood next to the uncertain Saya, then sat down on the bed next to her. The mattress sank in, and their shoulders touched.

“Hitsuji?”

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

“You... You’re sure?”

“You were the one who suggested it. So, what do I do? I always go to sleep on my own, so I’ve never had someone put me to sleep before.”

Hitsuji lay on her back in bed, looking up to Saya.

“Sleep next to me, Saya.”

“Uh, o-okay.” Saya carefully lay down next to Hitsuji.

They would steal the last of humanity’s sleep, so that they could sleep soundly themselves.

18

Her heart racing with tension, it was hard to settle down to sleep. This was something she'd done countless times before, but the drowsiness just refused to come.

"...Hey, are you done yet?" Hitsuji said.

"Sorry, it's just kinda..."

"You're feeling tense?"

When Hitsuji said that, her voice sounded deeper than usual, and it felt gentle.

"Yeah... I wonder why. I should be able to just do it like I usually do."

"Let's try breathing in sync. Breathe gently. Keep an easy pace. Don't worry about me. I'll keep up just fine."

"Got it. Okay... Here goes."

Saya focused on her breathing.

Breathe in... Breathe out...

Breathe in... Breathe out...

She could hear Hitsuji breathing right beside her. Matching Saya's breaths. Breathing in, breathing out...

In a room with the curtains drawn and the lights out, the sound of a ticking clock caught her ear. It felt like she was gradually relaxing, but there was still no drowsiness yet.

Hitsuji let out a giggle. "I don't feel sleepy at all when you're squirming around next to me," she whispered in a hoarse voice.

"Sorry."

"Why don't you try singing a lullaby or something?"

“Whaa...”

“What do you mean, whaa? Are you serious about putting me to sleep or not?”

“I am... Just hold on a bit...”

While Saya was trying to find a way to get to sleep, Hitsuji turned on her side so she was facing her.

“Okay, then talk to me.”

“About what?”

“Like about how you feel about me.”

“What do you mean?”

Hahh, Hitsuji let out a deep sigh. “Saya, you loved me in Nightland, but not in Dayland, right?”

“Y-Yeah, I guess.”

“Is that still true?”

“Huh?”

“You’ve recently been calling me by my given name, so maybe you’ve gotten a little more familiar with me.”

“Familiar... I guess you could say that, but...” Saya trailed off.

“I’m still no good?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s the opposite—Ah! No.”

“The opposite...?” Not meaning to tease the flustered Saya, Hitsuji spoke softly. Saya let out a little sigh and confessed.

“I know I’m probably going to weird you out when I say this, but...”

“Mm-hm.”

“I don’t know when it started... My feelings for you, the gap for them in Nightland and Dayland’s been disappearing.”

“Mm-hm.”

“It seems like... I love you now, too.” The moment she spoke the words, she felt a rush of regret. “Ahh! Hold on, wait. That’s not it. That’s not what I came here to talk to you about. Sorry, just forget I said that.”

“As if I’d ever forget. I’m thrilled.” Hitsuji’s tone was unexpectedly warm.

“B-But, Hitsuji, you’re... you know, you only like me in Nightland, right?”

“Nuh-uh. From the very beginning, I loved you whether it was in Nightland or Dayland.”

“Wha?!”

Saya sat bolt upright despite herself, while Hitsuji stayed horizontal and looked up at her.

“...From the beginning?”

“Ever since you suddenly appeared in front of me in the health room, I’ve always felt that way.”

“Huh? Huh? But...”

You were the one who suddenly showed up, Hitsuji, Saya wanted to say that in response, but her mouth refused to form proper words. Hitsuji, meanwhile, carried on.

“I’ve never once said I don’t love you in Dayland.”

“No way...”

Looking up at a dazed Saya, Hitsuji giggled.

“You’re so heartless. Just because you only loved me in Nightland, I bet you assumed I had to be the same way.”

“...No fair.”

“I’m not being unfair. You just misunderstood. Don’t try to make it anyone else’s fault.” Hitsuji placed her hand on Saya’s back, the former utterly speechless. “I wanted to tell you someday. I’m glad I could... Because you opened up to me, I was able to muster the courage to do so. Thank you.”

“N-No, I sh-should thank you..”

“Pull yourself together. You’re barely coherent,” Hitsuji said in amusement. Saya was hooked into laughing at herself, too. Laying back in the bed again, they looked at one another and shared a hearty guffaw.

“Geez, be quiet. Weren’t we going to sleep here?”

“R-Right, we were. Let’s calm down.”

They tried to take deep breaths, but even having their eyes meet was enough to trigger a cascade of laughter.

“This is hopeless. Let’s lie on our backs.”

“Mm-hm.”

The two laid facing the ceiling, trying to steady their breathing.

“Fwah...” Hitsuji covered her mouth to stifle a yawn. It was infectious, and Saya let out an even bigger yawn.

“...Haww. You getting tired?”

“Now that I’ve said what I wanted to, maybe it’s the sense of relief, but I’m suddenly feeling sleepy.”

“Me, too...”

“Don’t pass out before me, okay? You promised you’d be the one to put me to sleep.”

“I know...”

When the two of them closed their mouths and were quiet, the drowsiness gradually crept up on them.

With her eyes closed, Hitsuji whispered, “Good night, Saya.”

“Good night, Hitsuji—”

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Beneath the bright night sky, atop the sheet-covered land, countless humans were sleeping.

The scene I'd seen when the crystal egg was shattered spread out before my eyes again. Was this the result of all veneer being stripped away from Nightland? There was a massive Suiju that looked like a stretched out elephant stepping over the sleeping people.

When we descended to the sheets, Hitsuji and I looked at the line of sleepers stretching off into the horizon.

"We're... going to wake all these people up?" Hitsuji asked.

"Every last one of them, yes."

"It looks like a lot of hard work, you know."

"We use the power of imagination in Nightland, right? Isn't that what all of you taught me?" I crouched down, grasping the sheet at my foot. Hitsuji grabbed the fabric beside me.

"We'll do it on three."

"Got it."

"One, two..."

"Three!"

Shouting the last number together, we pulled with all our might.

"Good moooorniiiiing!" we both shouted.

The sleeping people rolled over, one after another. Their eyes snapped open one moment, and in the next, they were gone. Their surprised faces were hilarious, and we both laughed ourselves silly.

"Everyone, get up! No more sleeping!"

Hitsuji shouted and then burst out laughing. At some point we'd grown to be the size of mountains, and we were driving the miniature people at our feet out of Nightland one after another. The massive Suiju realized something was amiss and tried to approach, but with its feet caught up in the waves of the sheets it couldn't get close. Taking advantage of that, we kept pulling on the sheets for

what seemed like forever.

How much time had passed? Eventually, we ran out of sheets. The land became a pull-out mattress, and there was not a single person left sleeping on it. We'd returned to our normal sizes, too.

In place of the vanished humans, we saw a towering wall closing in from the entire horizon. Made from countless Suiju, it was a horde larger than anything we had ever seen. The sea of sleep had dried up, so all the Suiju had poured into our sleep.

"Whoa, what a sight." Hitsuji said in amazement. "There were that many Suiju, huh. When I think about how they're all in our dreams, it feels kind of strange."

"I'll bet Nightland's never gotten this small before, though."

"Now if we just wake up, we can wipe out the Suiju... You're so smart, Saya."

"Yeah, kinda."

"Ran, and Kaede, and Midori—Do you think we'll all be able to Sleepwalk together again?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Okay, well, I guess it's about time... Let's wake up."

While embracing a sense of accomplishment, we tried to wake up.

"..."

"..."

"...Huh?"

Wait, how were we supposed wake up again?

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We couldn't wake up.

It took some time to accept that horrifying revelation.

We could jump and fly, we could pinch our cheeks and pull on our fingers, but no matter what we did, we couldn't leave Nightland. We could only look at one another in a daze.

It was probably impossible to make Nightland disappear completely. The collective unconsciousness that connects all of humanity—if that interpretation of dreams was true, even if we expelled the rest of humanity from Nightland, the consciousnesses of those people in Dayland would not let go of Nightland. And so, we were left behind, the last two dreamers in Nightland. The price of robbing people of sleep was that we had been imprisoned in it.

It could be that just one of us might have been able to wake up. However, in that case, the other would be left behind. One of us was guaranteed to be sacrificed—it was a deadlock.

"Well, I'm beat. Guess it's time for a double suicide," I said out of desperation. Hitsuji thought deeply about it.

"...I understand. It's okay."

"No, don't understand."

"I mean, I wouldn't want to wake up alone. I'd rather we disappeared together."

"Well, yeah, I feel the same, but..."

Sitting down on the mattress, looking up at the encroaching wall of Suiju, we were at a loss for what to do for a while.

"Thinking this much is making me sleepy again." Hitsuji tilted her head onto my shoulder. I didn't know how long we could stay like this, so I stopped holding myself back and leaned my head against Hitsuji's, too.

“You smell nice, huh, Hitsuji. Even in dreams.”

“You do, too, Saya. Didn’t you know?”

“I never knew. I don’t just stink of sweat?”

“Not at all. I love it.”

Hitsuji pressed her nose against my neck, making me shrink my neck into my body because it tickled.

“Hey, now.”

“It’s a relaxing smell. When you’re beside me, I feel like I can sleep really well.”

While I was at the mercy of her sniffing, I had a flash of inspiration.

“...That’s right.”

I picked up a set of sheets that was right by us, rolled into a ball. The sheets had seemed to stretch out to infinity, but now that I held them in my hands, they were a perfectly normal size.

As I stood, Hitsuji looked up at me.

“What about the double suicide?”

“We’re not doing that. Just hold on.”

I spread out the sheet on top of the mattress.

“What are we going to do?”

“Sleep.”

“Here?!”

I put my memory and imagination to work. The pillow I always used appeared in my hands. I passed that to Hitsuji, making another identical one for myself.

“Sorry to make you use my pillow, though.”

“Wait, this is your pillow?” Hitsuji hugged the pillow and sniffed it. “It is.”

“Hold on! Stop that, you’re embarrassing me.” While I was protesting despite myself, I used my imagination to produce another tool. A light summer bed

cover. I put the pillow down on the mattress, laid out the bed cover, and invited Hitsuji to join me.

“Come on, we need to sleep quickly. Scary things are coming.”

“What do you mean...?”

“If you sleep during a Sleepwalk, you’ll be swallowed up by Nightland—I’m pretty sure that’s what I was told,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“It’s all or nothing. Let’s bet on that. Just maybe, like the Suiju turn Dayland to Nightland, we might be able to turn Nightland to Dayland with our Sleepwalk. This could be a double suicide, it could be an escape, but we won’t know which it is until we find out ourselves.” Taking a wide-eyed Hitsuji’s hand, I sat down on top of the covers and pet her soft hair.

“Sorry. This is about all I can think of. If you’ve got anything better, tell me.”

“No. Saya... if I’m with you, I can handle any nightmare.”

I kissed Hitsuji on the forehead. “You be the one to put me to sleep this time, Hitsuji. Like always.”

“Okay, my beloved.” Hitsuji got under the covers with me. Together in bed, the two of us side-by-side, we looked at one another. I saw myself reflected in Hitsuji’s eyes.

“Good night, Hitsuji.”

“Good night, Saya.”

When Hitsuji closed her eyes and relaxed, her Blanket immediately wrapped around me.

In the middle of this apocalyptic scene, as Suiju rushed in from all sides, we went to sleep in Nightland.

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Hokage Aya suddenly awoke, sitting up lethargically in bed. The late afternoon sun had warmed the room to the point she was sweating, but despite that, it wasn't that unpleasant of an awakening.

The dream she'd been having was an odd one. She was in a wide tatami room with a lot of other people, unable to get to sleep even if she tried. While she was tossing and turning as if from nightmares, even though she was already in a dream, suddenly the bedding was pulled from beneath her and she was cast out... Was that the shock that woke her up? With her vague memories growing indistinct, she was soon unable to remember.

Standing up to go wash her face, she went out into the hall. She passed by Saya's room, but there was no sign of her little sister. Now that she thought of it, she felt like she had a hazy memory of seeing her sister's face in that dream. It had looked like she was having fun. The way she'd been having a riot while her sister was tormented by nightmares, it was a little frustrating, but... It had been completely different from the usual taciturn impression she gave off.

Going down to the first floor, she washed her face in the washroom. Even though she hadn't been asleep long, her head was clearer than it had been in a while. On her way back to her room, she looked towards the entrance hall. Saya's shoes hadn't returned yet. Come to think of it, she'd said something about going to see a friend.

The jolly laughter of Saya from the dream returned to her ears. It had been a surprising impression, but maybe that was how she acted when she was with her friends.

Aya threw on a pair of sandals and opened the front door. The mix of light purple and crimson created by the setting sun was beautiful, and for a while she remained captivated by it. A quiet evening had settled over the town. Behind Aya, there was a sound from the house. Her parents had apparently woken up, too.

I wonder if she'll be back by dinner. Standing in the entrance hall, Aya subconsciously searched for Saya as she watched the town at twilight.

In the bedroom at Sakaimori Bed & Bedding, three people simultaneously regained consciousness.

They'd been sitting together on the sofa, and they fell asleep... Or it felt more like they'd had a momentary lapse of consciousness. Though they were surprised by the short rift in their memories, the three realized. For the first time in a while, the three had been able to sleep without resistance.

Had they done it, then? Had Saya and Hitsuji defeated the Suiju, and regained the sleep they had stolen?

The three looked to one another, nodding, and then leaned back on the sofa again. With Ran in the center, Kaede and Midori both leaned their heads against her. Closing their eyes, they went to sleep again, this time of their own volition. It was no match for Hitsuji's power, but the feeling of security from having one's companions nearby steadily lead them toward sleep.

They still did not know what Nightland was like now. However, if Saya and Hitsuji were still there, they had to go and get them.

Sparkling patterns danced in the darkness behind their eyelids. As they dove deeper into sleep, those patterns gradually transitioned into Nightland's starry sky.

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I woke in bed. It was quiet outside the curtained windows, and pitch dark inside the room.

Reaching out, I felt around beside me; when my fingers touched warm flesh, I was relieved.

I didn't know what sort of place we had reached by traveling through Dayland

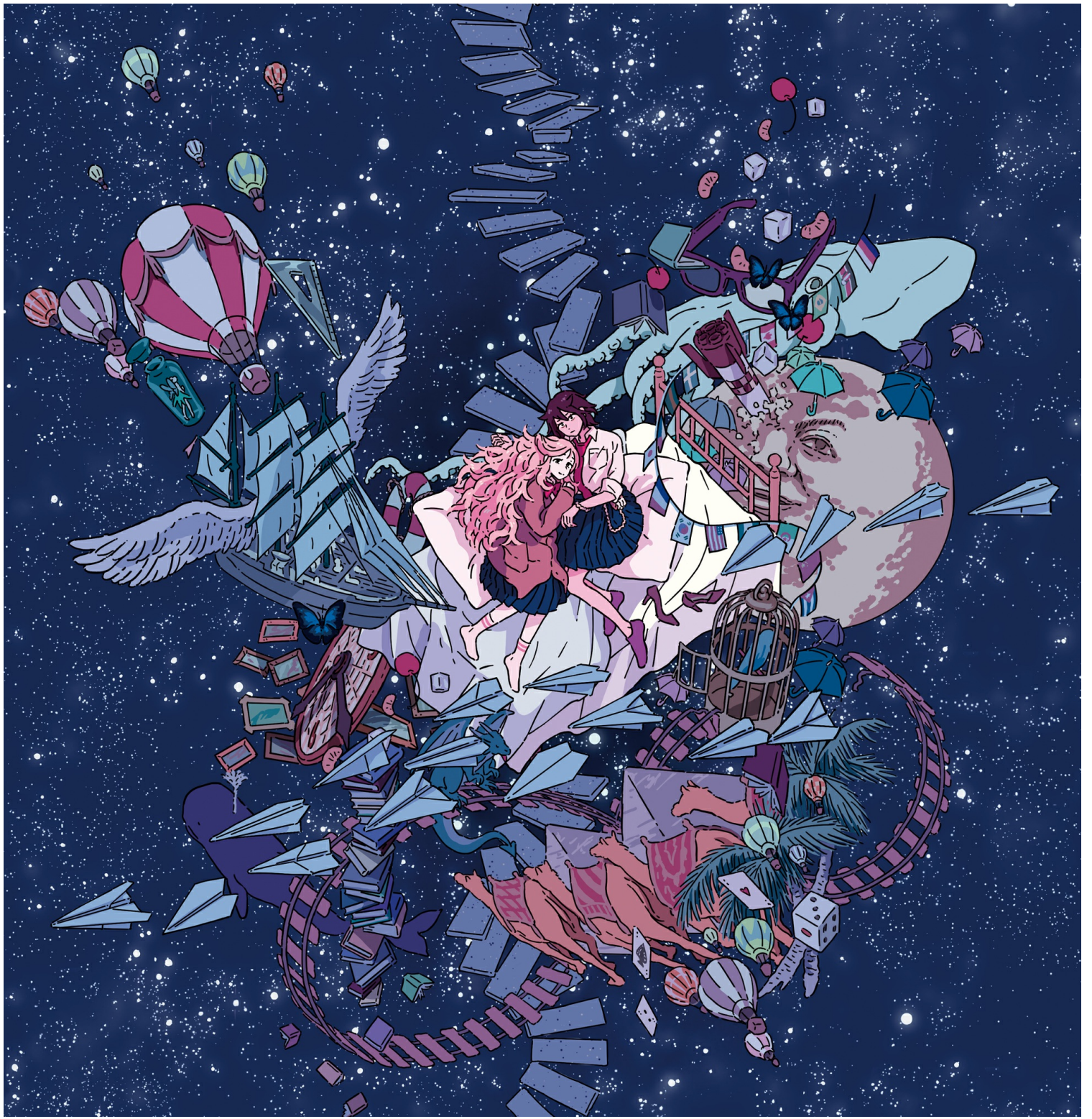
and Nightland yet, but for now, I couldn't sense any Suiju.

Her eyes opened, and I could feel her beginning to stir.

"...Morning."

"Good morning."

Even if I couldn't see her, I knew she had smiled. Her eyes sparkled, reflecting the little light that shone in through the curtains. As if a beast in human form was lying there.





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